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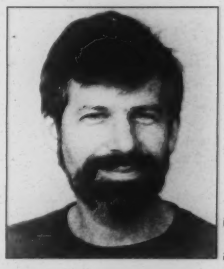

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The Mystery of Innocence

Felicia's Journey
by William Trevor.
Viking, 213 pp., $21.95

Hilary Mantel

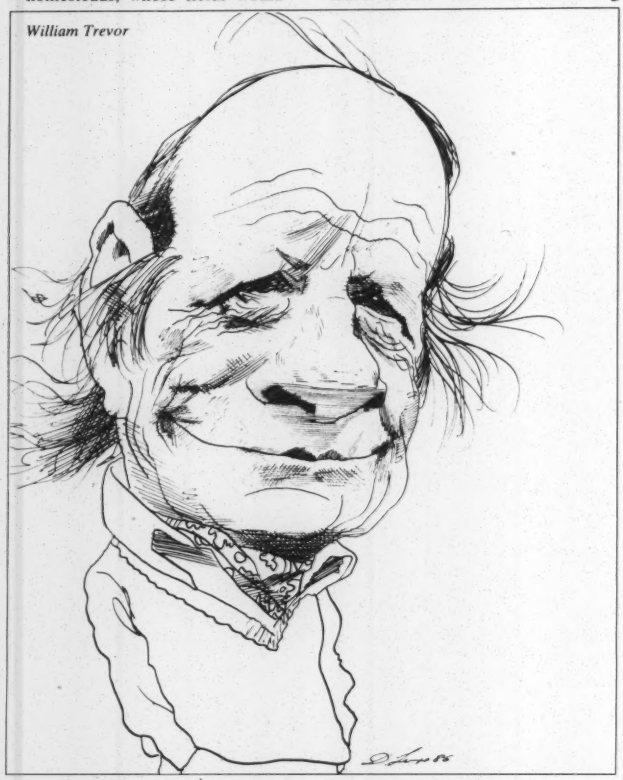
> "Aren't you the pretty one!" Dirty Keery used to call out, lying in wait in Devlin's Lane... he said it to all the girls going by, trying to get them to come close to him. And he was blind in any case.

Felicia, at seventeen, has not received many compliments from sighted men. She has, her girlfriends say, "the face for a nun." Her mother is dead, and she lives in a small Irish town with her father, her brothers, and her great-grandmother, with whom she shares a room. For three months she has been unemployed. She used to work at a canning factory, but it closed down. There's nothing doing at Erin Floor Coverings, or Hickey's Hotel, or Maguire Pigs. The way ahead looks bleak, a continuation of thankless drudgery for her family, her unemployment pay going into the common pot and her personal freedom narrowing to vanishing point.

William Trevor is the bard of loss, the poet of failed lives and ruinous impulses. His usual characters are small people, who do not have control over their own lives and who are defined by the words that other people use about them: "Strange when you think of it, how people are given their names. Strange, how people are allocated a life." In thirteen novels and eight short-story collections he has shown himself a close observer, a fine stylist, a master psychologist. In *Felicia's Journey*, which in the UK won the prestigious Whitbread Prize, he brings all these qualities into play, and adds to them a teasing manipulation of the reader's sensibilities, so that the book has the elegant tensions of a high-class thriller. It is a departure, his publishers claim, and certainly it has brought him a new and wider public; but the preoccupations of the novel are traceable in his earlier work, and the author's voice is as dry and fastidious as ever.

William Trevor was born in 1928, to a Protestant family in Cork. During his childhood his family moved often, because of his father's job with a bank, and he has said, "Every town in Ireland feels like mine." The outsider and the transient visitor, which Trevor has always been, sees the particularity of each community, the tiny features that make it just itself and no other place; so when he describes Felicia's town, we see at once its public houses, its single coffee shop, its dental surgery with the tarnished brass plate; we see the streets that confine and limit her, yet safely enclose her, and we can identify her place in the family, in the town, in history. Felicia's great-grandfather was a Republican who died in the 1916 rising, leaving his wife of one month expecting a child. That wife is now barely sentient, an old woman kept in a back room; but in the evenings her grandson, Felicia's father, turns over scrapbooks with mementos of the dead patriot and his friends, and relives the sacrifice, and reads the words of Eamon De Valera:

> "The Ireland which we have dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires men should live."



William Trevor

That is the dream; the reality, for Felicia, is the watery greens bubbling on the stove, the empty purse, the procession of days. To her amazement, a boy called Johnny Lysaght asks her out for a drink. Johnny works in England, and has come home to see his mother.

Trevor does not present Johnny as a cold-hearted seducer. He is just a normal young man who takes his opportunities in life, and who likes to cover his tracks: who needs to cover his tracks, because in fact he is a soldier in the British Army. Felicia's father knows this, or strongly suspects it, and tries to warn his daughter off. But Felicia isn't listening; she has the stubbornness often found in innocent people. Humble, completely lacking in confidence, Felicia is dazzled by Johnny's attention—and very soon she is pregnant, too.

It is a stock situation, but William Trevor makes us feel quite freshly what it might be like to be as vulnerable as Felicia is now. There is no inward rebellion; she does not fight against her situation, because her expectations are so low: "Why should she have supposed that the happiness his love had given her was her due, and free?"

But the fact of her pregnancy must be dealt with somehow. She is sure that Johnny will help her as soon as he knows. He has somehow—and she believes it's not deliberate—taken his leave of her without a forwarding address. All she knows is that he works at a lawn-mower factory somewhere in the English Midlands. His sour, lonely mother will not help her; she doesn't want another woman in her Johnny's life. Who can Felicia tell? There is a conversation with her father that might have led somewhere, but didn't.

> "You're no more than a child, Felicia," her father commented eventually, on his feet and already going from the kitchen. He hesitated by the door, as if about to say something else, and just then her brothers returned from Myles Brady's and sat down at the table to eat slices of a pan loaf and spreadable cheese, which every night at this time they did. Her father closed the door behind him.

There are passages like this throughout *Felicia's Journey*, exquisitely weighted and balanced like intricate little machines. The words are small, ordinary ones, and it is the rhythm, the juxtaposition, the selection that give them their pathos: the slightly Martian quality of the expression "spreadable cheese," the pushing of the verb to the limit of the sentence. The positioning serves to emphasize the heavy, habitual quality of the brothers' action, its persistence into the years ahead, as if the boys and their nightly munching are predestined creatures; the sentence's dying fall anticipates the closing of the door. That door will close again and again, as love and life are denied, as men take their leave with words unsaid; and there is nothing for Felicia to do but what many Irish girls have done before her, and take the boat to England.

Felicia's Journey now becomes a novel of deracination. The girl has no idea how to negotiate what lies before her. She cannot understand the local accent, and she has never imagined such places as the sprawling conurbations through which she must trail to find her baby's father; she sees that "there's never a stretch of empty countryside." She cannot find a lawnmower factory anywhere near the place she vaguely remembers that Johnny mentioned. Perhaps, then, a shop that sells lawn mowers, or parts for them, or other requisites for gardeners? Or perhaps machines of some other type? Or perhaps she should be looking in some other town? Yet the towns run into one another, and the concerned feed her false clues, and the self-absorbed don't listen to her. The landscape through which she now moves seems beyond the human scale, not built to be inhabited.

> The industrial estate is an endless repetition of nondescript commercial buildings, each with a forecourt for parking. Trade names blazon: Toyota, Ford, Toys 'Я' Us, National Tyre and Autocare, Kwik-Fit, Zanussi, Renault Trucks, Pipewise, Readybag, Sony, Comet. Next to Britannia Scaffolding are Motorway Exhausts, then C & S Roofing, Deep Drilling Services and Tomorrow's Cleaning Today. At an intersection a little further on, Allparts Vehicle Dismantlers share the corner with OK Blast & Spray Ltd.
>
> The concrete roads of the estate are long and straight. Nobody casually walks them for the pleasure of doing so. No dogs meet other dogs.... She tramps wearily back to the town, on the grass verge beside a wide dual carriageway. An endless chain of lorries and cars passes close, the noise of their engines a roar that every few moments rises to a crescendo...

This is the contemporary England that most novelists don't care for. Here's no rural calm to be shattered, no smart urban wickedness to relish; they see only the banal. Trevor sees the banal and investigates it. The gigantic soot-stained mechanism of the industrial revolution has crumbled away, and what industry remains is "light": jaunty, even, with its brightly unimaginative logos and its out-of-town sites sprinkled with struggling saplings, its light-handed women workers and its bright-eyed zeal to create every day some new need it can fulfill. Small towns are dying or dead, eviscerated by planners; life and commerce are conducted on the margins, in giant shopping malls, on the industrial estates that Trevor describes. Those without personal transport—unless they have Felicia's uncomplaining stamina—are excluded from these places: so they are not for the poor or the old or the sick or for those who

are—for any other reason—pedestrians. They breed only fleeting, casual contacts; they are for the shuffling of resources, the exchange of cash. They are for people whose wants are definable, material, and affordable.

The landscape of *Felicia's Journey* was created, roughly speaking, during the Thatcher years. William Trevor has no overt political agenda; he is not that sort of writer. He is too old and wily an operator to settle for the small returns of the satirical novel, or to stifle the universality of his story with ephemeral complaint. But the contrasts between Irish and English society are strongly drawn. On the one side, there is cohesiveness and continuity: there is also suffocating conformity, and the backward-looking intolerance which makes Felicia's departure a necessity. Across the sea in England, there are communities that barely hang together, and the individual life goes unremarked. In England you can disappear, you can lose your very name. Trevor's Ireland does not fulfill De Valera's dream. But England has never had such an ideal in the first place; there was no dreaming height from which England could slide. When our leaders articulate a vision of England, it is a nostalgic, retrospective one. The best is always past.

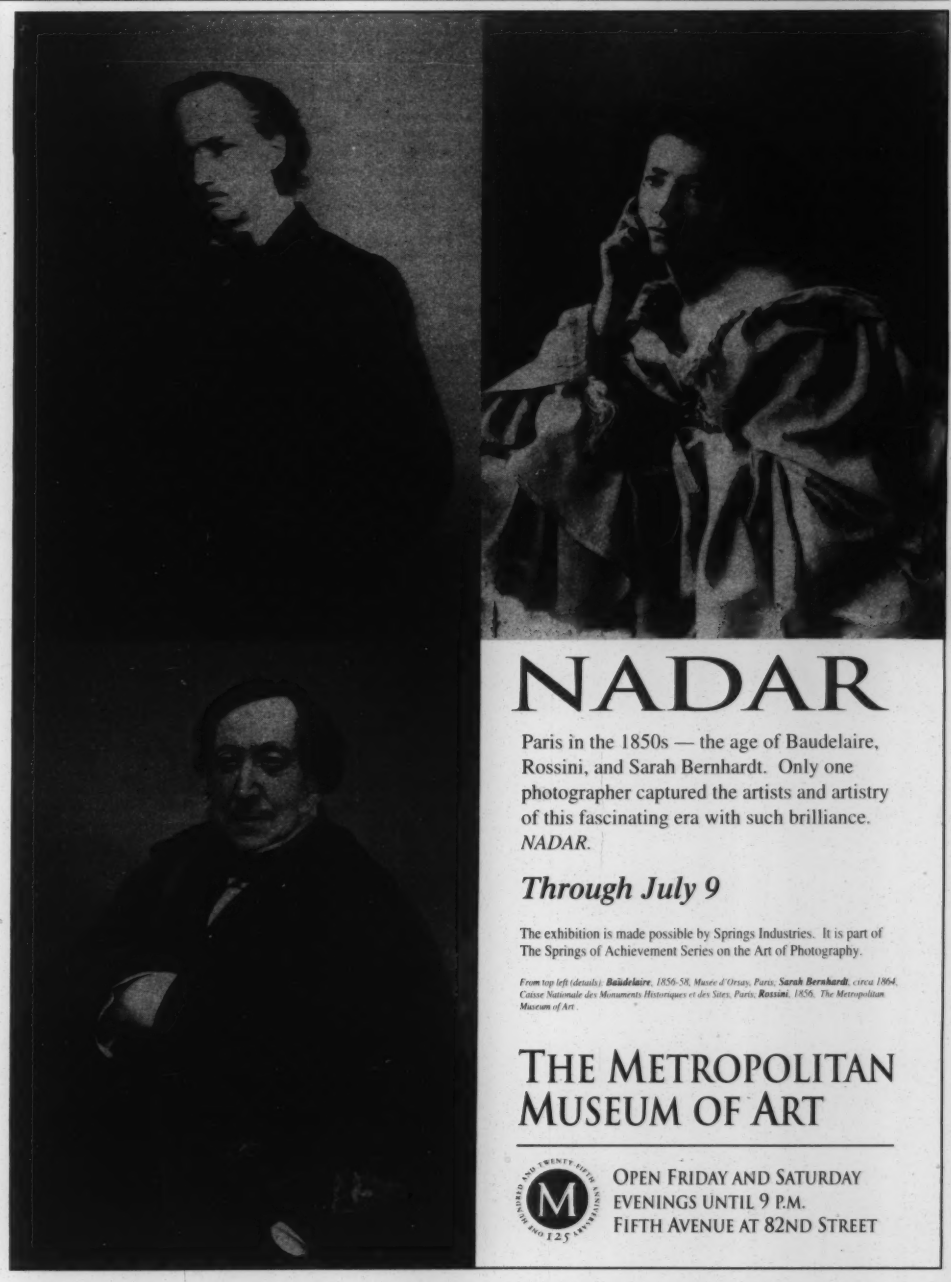
In the course of her search for Johnny, Felicia will meet many eccentrics, misfits, and derelicts, so that—in typical Trevor fashion—the painful story is shot through with bizarre black comedy. Just occasionally—and it is practically the only reservation one can feel about the novel's effectiveness—there seem to be too many of these minor actors on the stage. When, for example, Felicia finds herself living in a household of religious cultists, the reader gets distracted trying to work out whether any of them are of long-term consequence. This flaw is small and understandable. When the eccentrics are simmering nicely, there's always a temptation to throw one more in the stew. One could propose a rule of thumb for novelists: if you invent more than three real oddities, and mean to put them on the page together, waste one or leave him over for another novel: grotesques are transferable.

Of course, if you have Trevor's perceptions, almost every human being has some quality which, examined closely, searchingly, makes him grotesque. His 1976 novel, *The Children Of Dynmouth*, examines this phenomenon. A very odd teen-age boy, Timothy Gedge, brings his mordant and skewed perceptions to bear on the seemingly blameless inhabitants of a small seaside town. An innocent little girl whose mother died in an accident comes to believe her father is a murderer. A clergyman decides he would be more usefully employed at the fish-packing station than he is in charge of a church. An elderly man, long married, has to admit to himself his sexual predilection for young boys. Given a little push by Timothy, his victims reveal themselves in a variety of destructive ways; their negative thoughts and their guilt-ridden misperceptions begin to dominate and ruin their lives. Timothy, in many ways, fulfills the function of a novelist, finding out a truth about people which is less literal than metaphorical, and always unpleasant. His victims collaborate with him, sacrifices yielding to the knife of Trevor's wit. Interviewers charmed by Trevor's twinkly-eyed persona should be aware that here is a man possessed of dangerous knowledge about the human condition and considerable manipulative skill; readers of his fiction should know that every cut goes a little deeper than the first light sting suggests.

Black comedy is not Trevor's main intent in *Felicia's Journey*—not even black comedy of the haunting *Children of Dynmouth* type. It is a compassionate novel, which has at its heart a convincing portrayal of innocence: possibly, in a knowing age, the hardest quality to put on the page. Everything in Felicia is open, transparent; but in the course of her search she finds a man whose life is a tissue of deception and self-deception, whose thoughts are dark and private, and whose secrets are old and distasteful and deep. He is Mr. Hilditch, the catering manager of a factory, of whom Felicia stops to ask directions. Soon Mr. Hilditch is popping up at every turn, offering advice, lifts in his little green car: cups of tea, a shared meal in a café, even a bed for the night. From his first appearance the reader knows that he is a deeply sinister figure, and knows that Felicia will be deceived by him. The more Trevor tells us that he is an ordinary man, a respectable man, the stronger grow our fears that he is not.

Christened Joseph Ambrose fifty-four years ago, Mr. Hilditch wears spectacles that have a pebbly look, keeps his pigeon-coloured hair short, dresses always in a suit with a waistcoat, ties his striped tie into a tight little knot, polishes his shoes twice a day, and is given to smiling pleasantly. Regularly, the fat that bulges about his features is rolled back and well-kept teeth appear, while a twinkle livens the blurred pupils behind his spectacles. His voice is faintly high-pitched.

Mr. Hilditch lives alone, in the house he once shared with his mother, a detached house set amid shrubberies. He is obese, and spectacularly greedy: every day food occupies a large part of his attention. He is popular



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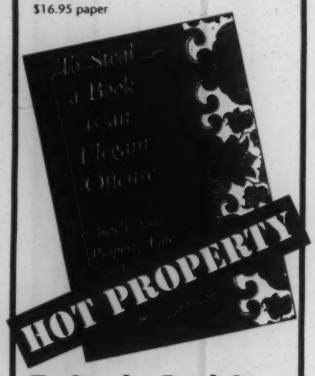

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at the factory where he works, because he is always jovial, and he reads the sports pages of the newspapers in order to have topics on which he can converse easily. His speech is sententious. His daily round is ordered. He guards against impulse, against the impulse that he fears will undo him. He is a lonely man, but in the past there have been companions in his life: Sharon, Bobby, Elsie, Gaye. Where are they now? The author is unspecific.

A thriller writer may withhold information from the reader in a mechanical, formulaic way; Trevor is doing something more subtle. Mr. Hilditch is in many ways blind to his own nature. It has to be revealed to him, as slowly as it is revealed to the reader. He edges toward his victim in a manner almost diffident. He nets Felicia with lies, but she has the opportunity to escape. Mere chance could lead her away.

Chance throws in her path the striking and flamboyant figure of Miss Calligary, a Jamaican woman, a door-to-door evangelist who offers Felicia a refuge at the "Gathering House" which she shares with several companions. Felicia stays for a few days, but in the end the ersatz spirituality and the grating cheeriness drive her out. The Technicolor optimism of Miss Calligary's world view is false, as she already knows. But Miss Calligary will remain a presence, a shadow in Felicia's life, because one of the houses she calls at, offering salvation, is Mr. Hilditch's. Her bright eyes miss nothing, though she often misinterprets what she sees, and in the end she will gather the threads of the mystery in her hands.

Miss Calligary has an ancestor in William Trevor's work—Miss Gomez, the Jamaican evangelist of *Miss Gomez and the Brethren* (1971). Indeed that book foreshadows *Felicia's Journey* in many ways. It is set in an area of South London where large-scale demolition is taking place, where only a public house and a pet shop still stand on one particular street. Miss Gomez turns up at the public house and offers her services as a cleaner, then proceeds to mesmerize the inhabitants with a claim that Prudence, the landlady's teen-age daughter, is the predestined victim of a sex crime. The putative criminal is a silent young man called Alban Roche, an assistant in the pet shop, who has a minor conviction for spying on the woman's changing room at the local badminton club; like Mr. Hilditch, Alban is obsessed by his stifling relationship with his dead mother.

Miss Gomez convinces everyone around her that she has second sight; when Prudence is missing for a few hours, the police are called, and a major search is mounted. No crime in fact takes place, but the threat of a crime hangs over the book. The passive figure of Prudence is a precursor of Felicia, a rehearsal for a portrait of a victim. Richly comic and deeply unsettling, the story has a narrower focus than the new novel, and yet it shares its concern with contingency and fate, the power of chance, the mystery of human goodness. When Miss Gomez returns to Jamaica, hoping to meet face to face the elders of her mother church, she finds that it does not exist and never has. The Brethren of the Way is a confidence trickster's device, and heartfelt airmail letters from herself and scores of others lie gathering dust in an abandoned house. The Brethren offered boundless compassion, boundless understanding; now that is taken away, and Miss Gomez must begin again, with fewer certainties:

> God worked in that mysterious way: through this reason and that, weaving a cobweb among all His people, a complexity that was not there to be understood while His people were any living part of it.

Similarly, Felicia will have to find her own truth; Miss Calligary's house is only a temporary refuge from which she must set out again on her quest.

Her money gone—in fact, Mr. Hilditch has stolen it—Felicia sinks into destitution. She can no longer afford lodgings, she sleeps outdoors. She becomes acquainted with the night world of the city, with the derelicts and social discards who inhabit it; she picks up fragments of their lives, never a whole or a coherent story, because in the people and their environment there is no coherence left. A woman called Lena, just out of prison, explains how

> a man she met in Westbourne Grove persuaded her to have snow-capped mountains tattooed on her back. They're there for ever now; act on an impulse and you have a landscape all over you for the rest of your days.

Lena's sidekick George is a well-spoken, educated boy of sixteen who has drifted far, far from the normal world. We don't know the cause, or what his life has been; we only learn that "there was a sermon once, he says, when he was at school. In which it was stated that bishops were lonely." Now George keeps a note of the birthdays of the bishops of England, and sends each of them a card. To the Bishop of Bath and Wells he has recently sent a card with a picture of a red squirrel, and this verse:

> *Of all the trees that grow so fair,*
> *Old England to adorn,*
> *Greater are none beneath the Sun*
> *Than Oak, and Ash, and Thorn.*

With great skill, Trevor has placed this poignant little rhyme at the very center of the book, as if to offer the reader a glimpse of an older, simpler world, a glimpse of something natural and true: as if he is lighting a candle for us in an ever-darkening landscape, or offering a vernal branch to combat the stench of corpses. He does not describe on the page the acts of violence by which Mr. Hilditch has made away with Sharon, Bobby, Elsie, Gaye; he does not allow Mr. Hilditch to think of them. He shows us a horribly lonely man, who kills for company. Mr. Hilditch likes to be seen with the current young girl, drive her around, be mistaken for her lover. The actual deaths are hazy. He does not dwell on them. They are a necessary stage, the gateway to Memory Lane, where the lost girls will walk forever, their hands resting confidingly on Mr. Hilditch's pudgy arm.

The surprise, for the reader, is that Felicia will escape. Lured to the house, she will realize at the last possible moment what is planned for her. It is Mr. Hilditch who will go under, a suicide—driven to despair by Miss Calligary bawling her message of salvation through his letter box. The final pages of *Felicia's Journey* are piercingly sad. Her child aborted, Johnny gone for ever, Felicia is reduced to begging on the streets; but she is alive, she can feel the sun on her face, and it is enough for her.

In the end, Mr. Hilditch's dark perversity, and the reasons for it, are less interesting, less puzzling, than Felicia's preserved innocence. It is not mysterious that people should serve their own ends and their own impulses, it is not odd if their self-serving sometimes takes strange forms and leads to evil deeds. The greater mystery is altruism—that people should act not out of self-interest but out of an impulse of grace. Felicia thinks about a woman dentist, who treats the street people free and in her own time.

> The woman dentist has dedicated her existence to the rotten teeth of derelicts, to derelicts' odour and filth. Her goodness is a greater mystery than the evil that distorted a man's every spoken word, his every movement made.

And of Mr. Hilditch, she perceives, "Lost within a man who murdered, there was a soul like any other soul, purity itself it surely once had been." The truths Felicia has learned are bleak and minimal, but they are her own.

It is rare to find a book which is so gripping as *Felicia's Journey*, yet is so subtle. There is no straining for effect, and hardly a false note in it. Trevor establishes an intimacy with his characters, showing them to us from the inside out; he examines microscopically the details of their lives, and presents them in prose so scrupulous and exact that they are transfigured. There are some of us, Trevor says, for whom merely to survive is a victory. But in *Felicia's Journey*, he suggests there can be a greater victory: to survive, and carry inside one's heart the certainty of grace. □

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The Misunderstood Victory in Europe

Norman Davies

Fifty years would seem to be time enough to prepare a definitive history of the Second World War. In an age of instant data-gathering, one might think that the historians could have arrived at a consensus for interpreting the main events of the war. In reality, no such consensus exists. In a season filled with fiftieth anniversaries, controversies arise over everything from the liberation of Auschwitz and the Dresden raid to the Smithsonian exhibition of the *Enola Gay*. Misunderstandings are particularly evident concerning the zone of Eastern Europe in which the decisive military campaigns were fought and the crucial ideological confrontation occurred. To commemorate the events of 1945, one needs a broad view of all that happened, and a broad view is often lacking.

The following article is a modified version of a lecture presented at the Polish Consulate in Montreal in conjunction with the local Polish-Jewish Society, on August 16, 1994.

Why are some things remembered and others forgotten? That is the theme I want to pursue about the Second World War. I should say, incidentally, that my own memories of the war are extremely selective. I can just remember the blitz of Manchester, or perhaps my father's tales about the blitz of Manchester. I can remember the blackout, the powdered eggs, and the gas masks. But I think no British person should pretend that being resident in England could count as being in the thick of the action. If my own memories are peripheral, it is partly because Britain's own position in the war was peripheral. There should be no illusions. The heart of the conflict in Europe was not in the West, but in the East, centered on the mortal rivalry of the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler and the Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin. Much of the pain of that war, more acute than anything in Western Europe, was borne by the unhappy peoples who lived within the reach of the two dictators. Unfortunately, they are not the ones who have dominated the history-writing.

Fifty years ago, on August 16, 1944, the American ambassador in Moscow visited the Soviet Foreign Commissariat to discuss the coordination of Allied assistance to the Warsaw Rising. He was bluntly told that the Soviet government had no intention of giving assistance to an event which other Soviet agencies were describing as "the escapade of a criminal gang."

The Rising had broken out almost three weeks earlier, much in the way that Paris rose against the Nazi occupier that same month. The insurgents' goals in Paris and Warsaw were essentially the same. They aimed to liberate their capital city by attacking the German garrison at the critical moment when it came under fire from the advancing Allied armies—in Paris from the US Army, in Warsaw from the Soviet Army.

But when it emerged that the Soviets were going to halt their offensive in Warsaw's eastern suburbs for almost five months, the impending catastrophe was self-evident. The Rising, planned to last for two days or at most a week, lasted for sixty-three days. Instead of retreating, the Wehrmacht was able to bring up heavy reinforcements, among them some of the most brutal units of the Nazi war-machine. The heroic defenders fought on alone, amid savage reprisals. A quarter of a million people were killed. At the end, Hitler in his fury decreed that Warsaw should be razed. The survivors were deported to camps. Instead of defending Germany, thousands of German troops were kept in the deserted ruins of Warsaw until January 1945, blasting and burning it to pieces, house by house, street by street.

One might expect that the physical obliteration of one of Europe's historic capitals would be well known to everybody who knows anything about the

war. Apparently not. When the president of Germany was invited to attend the fiftieth anniversary of the Warsaw Rising, he sent a reply which said in effect: "The President of Germany will be honored to attend the commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Rising."[1] The president of Poland's neighbor, it seems, or at least the president's office, did not know that two great wartime risings broke out in Warsaw—the first in April 1943 in the Ghetto, and the second in August 1944. President Herzog duly redeemed himself by a fine speech in Warsaw on the theme of reconciliation. But the incident underlines how often the basic historical facts are simply not known.

Prompted by the German president's faux pas, I thought that I should talk about the theme of selectivity, that is, why our knowledge of the war is so disjointed, distorted, disproportionate. What exactly is it that impedes the full and evenhanded recall of the events of 1939–1945? I have fixed on nine categories of selectivity. One could probably find more.

1.

The first category is what I would call the selectivity of propaganda, that is, the deliberate and systematic technique of presenting only those facts and falsehoods which suit a particular political goal. Between 1939 and 1945, propagandists were at work on all sides. The main building of London University, where I now work, was taken over by something coyly called the "Ministry of Information." Yet in this sphere, there is no doubt that the real specialists worked elsewhere.

One example would be the Russian custom of talking not about "the Second World War in the USSR" but about "The Great Patriotic War of 1941–1944." You might think that nations can call the war whatever they choose. But then you realize that the title is a device for suggesting two things: first, that the Soviets did nothing but fight heroically in defense of their homeland, and second, that they were somehow not involved in the period preceding the German attack. How often have I read that the USSR in 1939–1941 was "neutral." If you had lived in Poland or Finland or the Baltic States or Romania, and had seen the Red Army marching in, it would never have struck you that these were acts of neutrality.

I mentioned the Warsaw Rising. Not everyone realizes that it was the subject of elaborate postwar propaganda. Poland's Communist regime was to contend that the only authentic anti-Nazi resistance had been led by Communists. In reality, it was the Communists who after the war annihilated the forces, the Home Army (AK), which had provided the backbone of wartime resistance. Many of those Resistance leaders were cast into the same cells as Nazi criminals.[2] The AK was virtually unmentionable for decades. The postwar Polish regime only started to mention it in the 1970s; it was then smeared as somehow "collaborationist" and "anti-Semitic."

If you are ever in Warsaw you should look at the monuments. In 1947, a fine monument was raised to the Heroes of the Ghetto, where Chancellor Willy Brandt would one day kneel in contrition. But nothing was raised to commemorate the general rising of 1944. When I first visited Warsaw in the 1960s, our guide took us to Dluga Street to show us the entrance to the sewers, which the Home Army fighters had used for their lines of communication. But we had to be shown it in secret. There was no explanation of the Warsaw Rising in any of the guidebooks of the time. The Home Army veterans were unable to raise a suitable monument to their fallen comrades until 1988. It is not surprising that a nation whose own memories were shackled for so long was not able to publicize the full facts of its wartime history to the world at large.

2.

The second category I would call the selectivity of personal perception. This is the opposite of the first one, namely the selectivity that derives from the involuntary and very often unconscious preferences which we all harbor. Every human being has a store of knowledge, of emotions, of loyalties, which automatically filters all incoming information. Although some of us, especially historians, pretend to be impartial and scientific, none of us in my view can be completely unbiased.

The two scholarly studies of the Warsaw Rising available in English for the last twenty years were written by historians who had lived through it in person. They were both caught in the same bloody fighting, and saw their friends slaughtered. One of them, Janusz Zawodny, later became an American scholar; the other, Jan Ciechanowski, a professor in London. Both were free to write whatever they wished. Both had the same access to sources. Yet they produced diametrically opposed analyses. Zawodny, essentially sympathetic, saw the Rising as a Greek tragedy, in which the Poles, abandoned by their Allies, were doomed to be crushed. Ciechanowski was highly critical of the Rising's leaders and of their determination to take up arms without having secured the prior consent of the Soviets. Zawodny's book was banned by Poland's Communist censorship. Ciechanowski's was welcomed. The startling discrepancies can only lie in the perceptions of the historians themselves.[3]

3.

The third category is that of geographical selectivity: if you like, the sin of parochialism. The Second World War was fought in two major theaters of action: in Europe and in the Pacific. Yet the two parallel theaters are often described separately. Few accounts of the war in Europe refer, for example, to the Japanese factor. And yet, at two moments at least, it was crucial.

In September 1939, after the secret protocols of the Nazi-Soviet Pact had prepared for the partition of Eastern Europe, it was clear that Hitler and

[1] As reported in *Tygodnik powszechny* (Kracow).

[2] Kazimierz Moczarski, *Rozmowy z katem* (Conversations with an Executioner) (Prentice-Hall, 1981).

[3] Janusz Zawodny, *Nothing but Honour: The Story of the Warsaw Uprising, 1944* (Hoover Institution Press, 1977); Jan M. Ciechanowski, *The Warsaw Rising* (Cambridge University Press, 1974).

Stalin were both out to reap the spoils of war. The so-called Pact of Non-Aggression was a deal to facilitate aggression by both signatories. The Wehrmacht attacked Poland on September 1. Its onslaught was so fierce that the whole of the country was soon falling into its hands. But the Soviets held off. The Nazi command was much concerned by the failure of the Soviets to assist them more promptly. Suddenly, the Red Army appeared on September 17, nearly three weeks late, crushing all resistance. Nazis and Soviets held a joint victory parade in the symbolic location of Brest Litovsk. On September 28, they signed a Treaty of Friendship, Demarcation, and Cooperation.

The question is: Why did Stalin delay? Was he just playing the hyena? Perhaps so. But the best explanation lies in Central Asia. In early September 1939, the Soviet Union was still engaged against Japan in a campaign in Mongolia, where a young general, Georgy Zhukov, distinguished himself.[4] The truce with Japan was signed on September 15. Stalin gave the order to invade Poland on September 16, and at dawn on the seventeenth the Soviet troops marched across the Polish border.

In February 1945, the Yalta conference began. One is often asked how Roosevelt and Churchill, on the brink of victory, could, in effect, have handed Eastern Europe to Stalin "on a plate." Once again, the best answer lies in Japan. The Americans still did not possess an atomic bomb. The battle on Okinawa had cost fifty thousand casualties. If the Japanese mainland had to be stormed, the cost would be much higher; some estimates ran as high as a million casualties. To avoid that, it was prudent to call in the Soviet Army. Stalin's unspoken price was a free hand in Eastern Europe.

Which reminds me of the curious art of geographical name-changing in which Russians have shown such expertise. All Poles know about the "Vistula Land," which the tsarist government created when it abolished the Kingdom of Poland in 1864. But particularly worth attention is the clause of the Yalta Agreement which authorized the Soviet Union to annex the long-disputed Kurile Islands. In 1945, the Soviet Army duly occupied the "Northern Kuriles" and the "Southern Kuriles" before seizing four more islands which had never belonged to the Kurile chain. These four islands were promptly renamed the "Lesser Kuriles" and the Japanese population was deported. Whenever one tries to explain why the government of Japan has never accepted this trick, one invariably hears, "But surely Stalin took the Kuriles with Allied agreement."

4.

The fourth category concerns the selectivity of stereotypes. It's generally understood, I think, that we can only conceive of human activities by using collective names and stereotypes. When describing a great war, we can't qualify every sentence about "the Germans" by exactly describing all the individuals who were subsumed in any given action. Without collective names, we could not process the otherwise unmanageable material. For the Allies, "the Germans" were the enemy. And the enemy were "Germans." This largest central European nation was presented to us either as consisting almost entirely of sympathizers of Hitler or of his passive servants. A major stereotype was based on the "bad Germans," and a complementary minor stereotype on the ineffectual "good Germans."[5]

If one looks deeper, however, one finds all sorts of interesting information. One German unit, which has been studied in great detail, was known as Battalion 101. Its members were all Hamburg policemen, citizens of one of the German cities least susceptible to Nazi ideology. In July 1942, these two hundred middle-aged men were drafted without warning into the army, and transported to Poland. One morning they were given their orders. Surrounded by SS officers in the village of Józefów, they were told to enter the neighboring town, to shoot every adult Jewish male they met, and to pack every Jewish female or child into railway wagons. For one small unit, it was their introduction to a war in which they killed more than 80,000 people. Twenty years later, a West German court compiled detailed files about all of them. They were the most ordinary of men. None, when he joined, was a Nazi. None knew about his future duties. Some, when ordered to butcher innocent civilians, claimed that they shot into the air. Others said: What could we do? This is not the picture of the beastly Germans one is used to.[6]

Another example concerns the Waffen-SS, the Nazi Party's elite military forces. Since they were headed by the fearsome names of *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* or *Totenkopf*, one naturally thinks of them as the most German and the most ideologically committed of all formations. And yet if one examines the full list of the thirty-nine Waffen-SS divisions in the field by 1945, one finds that the majority of them were not German at all. After 1939, the recruiting criteria were relaxed. In the end, there were three Dutch Waffen-SS divisions from Holland and three Hungarian divisions; two Belgian divisions, two Russian divisions, and two Latvian divisions. There were Waffen-SS divisions from Serbia, from Croatia, from Albania, from Bohemia; Waffen-SS divisions composed of Estonians, of Ukrainians, of Italians, and of Finns. The *Waffen-SS Wiking* and *Nordland* consisted of Danish and Norwegian volunteers: the *Waffen-SS Handschar* of Bosnian Muslims, the *Waffen-SS Charlemagne* of Frenchmen. The Waffen-SS even listed an embryo British division, the *Legion of St. George*. There was no Polish SS.[7]

Photograph © Bettmann Archive

Polish Home Army resisters inside German lines, July 1944

5.

Selective Statistics. "Lies, damned lies, and statistics," as Mark Twain put it. In order to comprehend any vast event such as a world war we have to quantify. We have to know roughly how many soldiers, how many divisions were fighting, how many casualties and civilian victims were affected.

Until recently, four well-known round figures were constantly repeated. One was: "twenty million Russian war dead"; another "six million murdered Jews"; a third one "six million Polish citizens killed"; and lastly, "four million victims of Auschwitz." Of those four statistics, I am convinced that the "six million Holocaust victims" is the only one that will withstand sustained scrutiny. All the others are being revised up or down. The Auschwitz figure has already been officially reduced by the State Museum of Auschwitz from 4 million to between 1.2 and 1.5 million.[8]

For example, the "twenty million Russian war dead" were suddenly produced in Moscow after the Soviet census of 1959 showed that demographic projections based on prewar estimates left a shortfall of twenty million. What it didn't reveal is that there were some six million people whose unnatural deaths during the war years can be attributed to Stalin. Should *they* be counted among the victims of fascism? Equally, it doesn't show that Russians accounted for only 55 percent of the Soviet population. Moreover, if you look at the map, you see the Nazi occupation barely reached Russia proper. What the Nazis occupied was not Russia, but the Baltic states, Belarus, and Ukraine. And that is where the worst casualties were often inflicted, not least among the Poles and Jews of those republics. How often do you hear what I think probable, that the largest number of civilian casualties of the war in Europe was sustained by the Ukrainians? Soviet propaganda and its Western imitators generally portrayed Ukrainians in the role of SS collaborators and concentration camp guards.

Controversial episodes, such as the bombing of Dresden, attract different forms of manipulation. East German propaganda, seeking to maximize the sins of the "Anglo-American imperialists," used to compare Dresden's losses to those of Hiroshima. Allied commentators usually quote the figure of 35,000 without caring to note that it refers only to the identified dead. Yet it is evident that many more tens of thousands must have been incinerated without trace in the Dresden firestorm. In all such cases, both minimum and maximum estimates are an absolute necessity.

6.

The next category, the selectivity of special interests, deserves perhaps the most attention. It is proper that every nation and every ethnic group should take a special interest in the fate of its own people. The danger comes when one group presents its findings in isolation from the experiences of others involved in the same places or in the same events.

What would nowadays be called "ethnic cleansing" in the provinces of Volynia and Galicia is a case in point. When I lived in Poland as a student, I used to hear talk about the massacre of tens or hundreds of thousands of Poles by Ukrainian nationalist bands during 1942, 1943, and 1944. No discussion of the subject had then been published. The first book I know to deal with it was published in the 1980s by the Bishop of Wroclaw, who had formed a commission to search the surviving diocesan records. And that little book made terrible reading. A village priest would report that on the night of, say, November 7, 1943, the Ukrainian bands would emerge from the woods, cut the throats of all the Catholics in their beds, or hack them to pieces with axes, or drive them into the church and set it alight. And so on, village after village, district after district. That a major campaign of genocide took place in those dark days in which very large numbers of people perished is now beyond doubt. It is one of the many lost stories of the war.[9]

[4]See Alvin D. Coox, *Nomonhan: Japan against Russia, 1939* (Stanford University Press, 1985).

[5]See the introduction to A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945).

[6]Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (Grove, 1993).

[7]See G. B. Stein, *The Waffen-SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War 1939–45* (Cornell University Press, 1966); A. J. Barker, *The Waffen-SS at War* (London: Ian Allen, 1982), especially the appendix "SS Divisions," pp. 121–122.

[8]Franciszek Piper, *Ilu ludzi zginelo w KL-Auschwitz?* (Auschwitz: Auschwitz State Museum, 1992).

[9]See Wincenty Urban, *Droga krzyzowa Archidiecezji Lwowskiej, w lat-*

But it is not enough to leave it there. The provinces where these horrors occurred had multinational societies. Before the war they were inhabited by similar numbers of Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians. By examining the whole picture, one finds that the "cleansing" of Poles was but one of a series of atrocities. Extensive Soviet repressions and deportations had scourged all communities of the region after it was forcibly annexed to the USSR in 1939.[10] In 1941–1942, the Jewish community was wiped out by the Nazis after their advance during Operation Barbarossa. Beginning in 1942, the Catholic Poles were murdered en masse by the Ukrainian nationalists, together with many ordinary Ukrainians who got in the way. And then at the end of the war, when the Red Army returned, there was an unrestrained purge of all so-called collaborators. When units of the Ukrainian Insurrectionary Army (UPA) took refuge in the Bieszczady mountains, a large area was laid waste and left without a living soul.

Hence all communities suffered appallingly. Bystanders in one operation became victims of the next. A community that was victimized in one round could spawn murderers later on. To confine one's sympathies to just one group is to miss the essential truth.

Similar stories can be told from the eastern borders of Germany. The revenge visited on innocent German civilians by the Czechs, or by Poland's postwar security forces,[11] amounts to criminal conduct by any standards one applies.

One of the most obscene features of life in wartime Eastern Europe is to be found in the mass killing and grotesque maltreatment of children. There are accounts of children selected on the ramp for the gas chamber or for genetic experiments. There are studies of colossal numbers of other young innocents orphaned in Siberia or kidnapped for racial breeding in the Reich. Many of these facts have been recorded, but they deserve more attention.[12]

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ach II wojny swiatowej, 1939–1945 (Wroclaw: Semper Fidelis, 1983); M. Terlecki, *Ethnic Cleansing of Poles in Volhynia and East Galicia, 1942–1946* (Toronto: Alliance of the Polish Eastern Provinces, 1993); Ryszard Torzecki, *Polacy i Ukraińcy: sprawa ukraińska w czasie II wojny światowej na terenie II Rzeczypospolitej* (Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1993); W. Poliszczuk, *Gorzka Prawda: zbrodniczość OUN-UPA* (Toronto, 1994).

[10]Norman Davies, Antony Polonsky, editors, *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939–1946* (Basingstoke: Macmillan/School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 1991); Keith Sword, *Deportation and Exile: Poles in the Soviet Union, 1939–1948* (New York: Saint Martin's Press/School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 1994).

[11]John Sack, *An Eye for an Eye: The Untold Story of Jewish Revenge Against Germans in 1945* (Basic Books, 1995).

[12]I. and J. T. Gross, *War Through Children's Eyes: The Soviet Occupation of Poland and the Deportations* (Stanford University Press, 1981); Richard C. Lukas, *Did the Children Cry? Hitler's War Against Jewish and Polish Children, 1939–1945* (Hippocrene, 1994).

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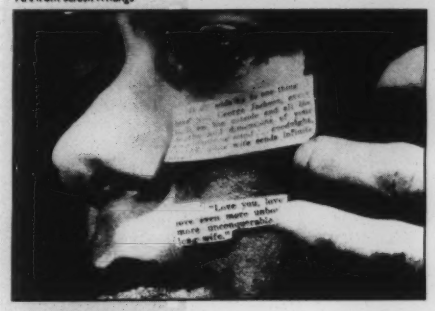

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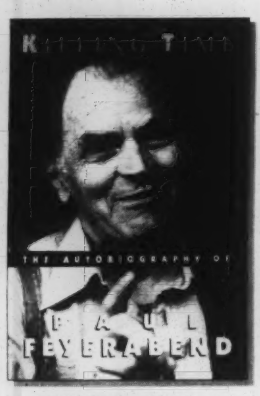

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7.

Next, a favorite of mine, the selectivity of professional historians. As I said earlier, historians often think of themselves as the most impartial of commentators. I have my doubts. There are several failings to which they are susceptible. One is their ultra-specialization. They tend to pick a tiny part of a subject during a very short period of time and to ignore everything that was going on around it. The body of historical knowledge is now so enormous, they feel incapable of reaching for the broader perspective.

Another failing is their characteristic reliance on documents and archives. But what do they do if the archives are not available? The largest combatant of the Second World War, the Soviet Union, never opened more than a small part of its archives to independent research. On top of that, though the ex-Soviet archives are gradually opening up, the Russians have discovered huge collections that nobody knew existed.

For example, there is something in Moscow called the *Osobyi Arkhiv*, or Special Archive. Since it was housed in the utmost secrecy, apart from the Party, State, and KGB archives, no one could have guessed what it held. In fact, it contains an enormous collection of documents which the Russians looted from Germany after the Nazis had looted all of occupied Europe. It is a historical treasure chest. The police records of the Third French Republic, from 1871 to 1940, later believed lost during the Allied bombing of Berlin, had been carried off by the Gestapo. They are now, it seems, in Moscow. The archives of Poland's "*Dwójka*," or military intelligence, priceless records for the prewar crisis, were also taken by the Gestapo in 1939. They, too, are in Moscow. So are apparently the archives of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and the British Army archives abandoned on the Dunkirk beaches. Everywhere the Red Army went, it lifted what the Nazis had lifted before them.

One effect of this is that historians have frequently proceeded with only half the documentation to hand. The celebrated debate on *The Origins of the Second World War*, for instance, provoked by A.J.P. Taylor's book, was almost exclusively confined to wrangles over the motives, priorities, and timetables of Hitler. The contestants had all the key Nazi documents in their possession, central among them the Hossbach Memorandum of November 5, 1937. Although it was generally accepted that the prewar crisis would ultimately result in a strategic clash between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, no one was willing or able to submit Stalin's aims, priorities, and timetables to the same sort of scrutiny. And the reasons are not hard to find. Few historians were willing to ask if the country which played the major role in winning the war against Hitler might also have played a part in causing it. Most importantly, there were no documents. Stalin was not one to have ignored a threat. But if a Soviet counterpart to the Hossbach Memorandum exists, no one I know of has seen it. [13]

[13]A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Atheneum, 1962); E.M. Robertson, editor, *The Origins of the Second World War: Historical Interpretations* (London: Macmillan, 1971).

8.

The selectivity of the victors. It is a commonplace that "History is written by the victors." The victors have the freedom to publicize their version of the war. The defeated do not. Hence the outcome of 1945 has bred what I have called the "Allied Scheme of History." This scheme continues to describe events according to the wartime priorities of the Grand Alliance, and in particular of "the Big Three"—the US, the UK, and the USSR.[14] Those priorities included the ideology of anti-fascism. Virtually anyone fighting against Hitler was judged to be fighting for freedom, democracy, and a better world. By this reckoning Joseph Stalin was a famous freedom fighter. Similarly, the Third Reich and its partners had to be seen as the sole source of all evil. Whatever the Nazi leaders said, particularly about the Soviet Union, they were incapable of telling the truth. Thirdly, since our great Soviet ally was largely responsible for the military defeat of Nazi Germany, its own failings had to be treated with indulgence. As all historians agree, three quarters of all German casualties were inflicted on the Eastern Front, at appalling cost to the Red Army itself. "Uncle Joe" had earned our gratitude. Certainly, he was not "our sort of democrat," but his instincts were somehow right. Certainly, the Soviet system had its faults, but it would be unjust to judge the Soviet leaders by the same standards as the ones applied to the enemy. What this led to, my old tutor A.J.P. Taylor once called the "Nuremberg Consensus."

In setting up the Nuremberg Tribunal in 1945, the Allied governments took it as axiomatic that the only crimes to be investigated were those committed by the defeated enemy. By so doing, they created the popular impression that no other serious war crimes need be considered. Of course, the Tribunal rendered an invaluable service to the world by documenting the unsurpassed crimes of the Nazis beyond all reasonable doubt. No rational person can have qualms about that. The critical matter, however, concerns the wartime events which were passed in silence. Whenever the defendants' lawyers made reference to crimes which might have implicated Allied agents, the Tribunal's president would cut them short. "It is not the purpose of this court," he ruled, "to try the activities of the Allied powers."

When, for example, the Nuremberg Tribunal agreed to address an episode involving the cold-blooded massacre of 26,000 Allied officers, it accepted the Soviet prosecutor's prima facie contention about this "Nazi crime." Yet as soon as the prosecutor's evidence was shown in court to be false, the entire case was dropped. No one at Nuremberg saw it as part of his duty to discover the true fate of those Allied officers. And so it remained for

[14]See Norman Davies, "The Misunderstood War," *The New York Review*, June 9, 1994, a review of Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

fifty years.[15] Not until President Gorbachev admitted that the Katyn massacres had been carried out by the Soviet NKVD did the Allied fiction collapse.

9.

The last category is what you might call moral selectivity. In wartime everybody has to be biased. There is a good cause to be fought for, and an evil one to destroy. But one would hope for a little more open-mindedness in peacetime. Alas, it is rarely so. Double standards abound.

One issue concerns the morality of the Allies' "Strategic Bombing Offensive," a policy which envisaged the systematic reduction of Germany's cities to rubble. It was based on the mistaken calculation that it would gradually bring the Nazi war effort to its knees, and that German civilians would lose the will to continue. And it was later justified by some as retribution for Nazi atrocities. Its greatest "successes" included the raid on Hamburg in 1943, when 43,000 people perished in one night, and the still larger triumph at Dresden. Few people heeded the words of Bomber Harris's critics, such as the Bishop of Chichester, who spoke out against the bombing of civilians at the time. If it was wrong to obliterate Coventry to no great military advantage, it was wrong to obliterate Dresden. It was not right or necessary to have pursued a just war with unjust methods.[16]

Another issue has made the headlines through a notorious libel trial in London. It concerns the forced "repatriation" to the Soviet Union of various categories of East Europeans, including some who had served in the German forces. Some of those deported to almost certain death, such as the Cossack Brigade and their dependents, had never even lived in the Soviet Union. Many could only escape through suicide.[17]

Here I should mention an unacknowledged hero. Major Denis Hills was a liaison officer of the British Eighth Army serving with our Polish allies in Italy. He was unusual in having a close knowledge of Eastern Europe, and in speaking several of the languages. He was the man who defied his reluctant superiors and permitted the illegal sailing of a shipload of Jewish refugees bound from La Spezia to Palestine—the incident behind the famous popular novel *Exodus*. At the war's end, he was assigned to the operation for collecting the refugees and prisoners whom Stalin was demanding.

He sailed on the first ship, which took five thousand ex-Soviet soldiers from Italy to Odessa, and witnessed the circumstances that convinced him that all those men were shot on arrival. Back in Italy, he was put in charge of a POW camp, with precise orders to "repatriate" a further large consignment of Russians. He was trapped in an acute dilemma. To refuse orders was treason: to obey immoral. So he left the gates of the camp unlocked at night. Also, by inventing various fictional categories of prisoner, as some of his American colleagues were doing, he was able to circumvent the criteria for repatriation. Soon a residue of fewer than two hundred remained. At their head was a Russian officer who upbraided Hills as he marched off, asking why all of them could not have been let go. The answer: "You are the sacrifice. Because of you the others will be safe."

The incident, I think, illustrates this problem of selective morality. We are not used to the idea of Allied officers receiving immoral orders. But if it was wrong for Adolf Eichmann to plead that he was only obeying orders, it is wrong for British officers to plead the same. In due course, Denis Hills was cashiered, having been caught performing cartwheels in the main square of Trieste at dawn. His memoirs are called *Tyrants and Mountains*. They illuminate several of the corners of war history that remain obstinately obscure.[18]

Three points in conclusion.

First, selectivity is unavoidable. The past is too immense to be recaptured whole. Whether we like it or not, we all have to indulge in various forms of selection.

Secondly, good historians need to admit to their limitations. The worst are those who imagine themselves to be free of any bias.

Lastly, having recognized the limitations of historians, we should try to compensate for them. By complementing the findings of one partial perspective with the findings of other approaches we can hope to create an overall picture which will be fairly comprehensive and reasonably accurate, and will maintain a sense of proportion.

World War II is the event that largely created the setting of the life we have today. Yet for fifty years, the largest single participant in that war imposed a policy of almost total historical selectivity, while the other victors basked in the illusion of their own impartiality. The countries that once lay between the USSR and Nazi Germany were virtually deprived of an independent voice. The recent liberation of Eastern Europe is a precondition for starting to reconstruct a credible picture.

In short: selective memories cannot be avoided, but they can be counteracted. Someday, somewhere, someone may write a fair, accurate, and comprehensive account of World War II. □

[15] Recent additions to the literature on Katyn include Allen Paul, *Katyn: The Untold Story of Stalin's Polish Massacre* (Scribners, 1991); P. M. H. Bell, "The Katyn Graves Revealed," in *John Bull and the Bear: British Public Opinion, Foreign Policy and the USSR, 1941–1945* (Edward Arnold, 1990), pp. 109–127; and Vladimir Abarinov, *The Murderers of Katyn* (Hippocrene Books, 1993).

[16] George Bell (Bishop of Chichester), *The Church and Humanity* (London: Longmans, Green, 1946), especially Chapter 14, "Obliteration Bombing."

[17] Nikolai Tolstoy, *Victims of Yalta* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977); Nicholas Bethell, *The Last Secret: Forcible Repatriation to Russia, 1944–47* (London: Deutsch, 1974); Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Minister and the Massacres* (London: Century Hutchinson, 1986).

[18] Denis Hills, *Tyrants and Mountains: A Reckless Life* (London: John Murray, 1992).

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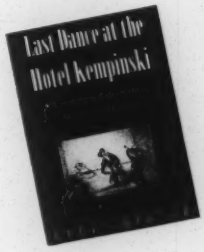

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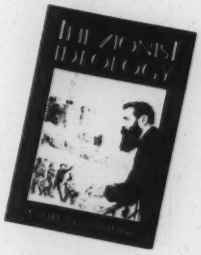

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The case of Whistler is an odd one. He became one of the most influential artists of his age, and his influence spread insidiously, like a stain, over generations of artists. His early work was admired by such giants as Courbet, Manet, and Degas; yet his total output of paintings was relatively small, and he produced a mere handful of individual works that could be described as having international importance. He was a celebrated wit and a dazzling conversationalist, but in the final analysis his mind was inferior to its intellectual pretensions. The famous "Ten o'Clock" lecture, which he first delivered in 1885, for example, is in reality little more than the frothiest gloss on the aesthetic of art for art's sake enunciated by Théophile Gautier sixty years earlier.

During the last two decades of his life—he died in 1903—he was lionized by the Symbolists and the Decadents, although significantly enough it was writers and poets who now most venerated him. Because he belonged nowhere and yet longed to be at the center of things he managed to span a remarkable number of worlds while remaining the supreme outsider. It is characteristic of Whistler's self-glamorization that he should have seen and presented himself as a Southerner. (Henry James once described him as "a queer little Londonized Southerner.")

He was in fact born in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1834, the son of a former military officer turned civil engineer who in 1842 went to Russia to oversee work on the railroad from St. Petersburg to Moscow. He was joined by his family the following year, and soon Whistler was enrolled at the Imperial Academy of Fine Art in St. Petersburg while also perfecting his French. After the death of Whistler's father in 1849 the family returned to America. In 1851 Whistler entered West Point as a cadet at large; it was now that he incorporated his mother's maiden name of McNeill into his own. He was an indifferent student and was discharged from the Military Academy in 1854; quite apart from the unruliness of his nature, the fact that he was extremely short-sighted unfitted him for a military career. Whistler was never all that fond of reading, but at this time the chance discovery of Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* converted him to the idea of Paris and to Murger's own somewhat vapid reinterpretation of the doctrine of art for art's sake. Whistler arrived in Paris late in 1855 and lost literally not a moment in throwing himself into Bohemia. Never again did he set foot on American soil.

Whistler first of all attached himself to the circle of foreigners, mostly Englishmen, which revolved around George du Maurier. Like most of the group he enrolled as a student in the studio of Charles Gleyre (popular with foreigners), although his attendance there was infrequent. (Years later Du Maurier was to use Whistler as the model for Joe Selby, "the idle apprentice," in his novel *Trilby*. Whistler threatened to sue, and in subsequent editions the character was replaced by another.) However, two of Gleyre's pronouncements may not be without relevance for the development of Whistler's art. One was "black is the basis of all tone"; ivory black was seldom off Whistler's palette and he was to become first and foremost a tonal painter, achieving his effects by working with gradations of a limited range of colors applied as tints to dark or neutral grounds. Gleyre's maxim that "style is everything" is one that Whistler would come to endorse.

More important perhaps was the instruction that Whistler received at second hand from Lecoq de Boisbaudran, a teacher of great originality who insisted that his pupils draw from memory to encourage their imaginative powers. Lecoq's precepts were passed on to Whistler by two of his students, Alphonse Legros and Henri Fantin-Latour, from whom Whistler had become inseparable, having decided that the hearty bohemianism of the Du Maurier set was not the real article; together they formed the "Société des Trois." Through Fantin-Latour, Whistler met Courbet, already an influence on his art, and his talent began to blossom.

Throughout his first French sojourn Whistler maintained his contacts with England, staying mostly at the London home of his half sister Deborah, who had married the distinguished surgeon Seymour Haden, himself to become an accomplished etcher. It was there that Whistler painted his first important picture, *At the Piano*, begun in 1858 and finished the following spring. Its reception was mixed: the French tended to admire it but to many English eyes it looked unfinished and scrubby. The lure of London was very different from that of Paris. The Hadens provided home comforts, a certain degree of financial support, and contacts with prosperous art lovers. It was a lively time in England with the Pre-Raphaelites in their first flush and with the emergence of some spirited painters of contemporary life like W. P. Frith and Ford Madox Brown. But the artistic climate was many degrees cooler than that of Paris and to one of Whistler's temperament the idea of being a bigger fish in a smaller pool must have been attractive.

Courtesy of Glasgow Museums

James McNeill Whistler: Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 2; Portrait of Thomas Carlyle *(1872–1873)*

Whistler now proceeded to raise the banner of Realism in Wapping near the London docks, in a series of works whose true originality suggests that, had he cared to remain in France and face the discipline involved in competing with his peers in Paris, he might well have become an important peripheral figure in advanced French painting of the 1860s and a very different artist from the one into which he developed. The daring of *Wapping* (1860–1864), the key work in the series, is obscured by the fact that the very restricted and traditional palette seems at variance with the freedom of the brushwork and the very revolutionary composition; the startling way in which figures and objects are chopped off by the sides of the canvas and dropped off its lower edge was to become a feature of the work of Degas and Manet; and the creation of space by the use of plunging and intersecting diagonal wedges which simultaneously zigzag up the picture surface again looks forward to developments in the work of Degas.

By now Whistler had met Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites and had captured, temporarily, the heart of Swinburne, who understood him and nurtured his mind. Hitherto his work had had about it a strongly French feel, but *The White Girl*, although it was painted in Paris during the winter of 1861–1862, shows Whistler standing on the no man's land of the Dover-Calais packet boat. The pale, wraith-like figure of Joanna Hifferman, Whistler's striking red-haired Irish mistress, is a first cousin of John Everett Millais's youthful Victorian beauties; Jo, dressed entirely in white, spills flowers onto the snarling head of a wolf-skin rug, and the canvas is charged with some of the spiritualized sexuality of Rossetti's contemporary compositions. So it is not surprising that the French critic Castagnary, who was prepared to read hidden meanings into the straightforward voluptuousness of Courbet's nudes, was able to write about the painting in these terms:

> "What have you wanted to do," I asked this strange painter, "a tour de force of your craft as a painter, consisting in dashing off whites on whites? Permit me not to believe it. Let me see in your work something loftier, *The Bride's Tomorrow*, that troubling moment when the young woman questions herself and is astonished at no longer recognising in herself the virginity of the night before."

When the picture was shown at the notorious Salon des Refusés of 1863 it provoked a scandal that rivaled that of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.

Throughout his life Whistler was to reject the imputation of any literary quality in his work, but he did so in terms so hysterical that one can't help wondering if he was not dimly aware of its occasional existence. It is true that he rejected both the medievalizing and the anecdotal storytelling of so much contemporary English art. But it seems to me that literary quality in painting doesn't necessarily imply a narrative content; and the fact remains that from Whistler's written and recorded descriptions of the Thames at night we could form a fairly accurate picture of what his paintings of it might look like, while it is impossible to convey by words alone the impression produced by a landscape by, say, Monet or Cézanne. And one has only to compare the *White Girl* with Courbet's subsequent tributes to the same model to see how far Whistler was detaching himself from the meatiness of Courbet's realism, which, it should be added, he had in any case never been able to swallow whole.

Paradoxically it was at the time when Whistler's contacts with progressive French painting were beginning to weaken that he made what is perhaps his most significant contribution to the history of modern art. If Oriental and in particular Japanese art was discovered simultaneously by several Western painters, Whistler was the very first to manifest its influence overtly in his art and to popularize it, particularly in England, as a symbol of refined and emancipated aesthetic sensibility. In *The Little White Girl* of 1864, even if it were not for the fact that Jo holds a Japanese fan, the presence of a spray of fruit blossom in the bottom right hand corner and of a blue and white Chinese covered jar on the mantel shelf would be enough to inform us of Whistler's great new passion.

Japanese prints owned by him at the time of his death can be consulted in the British Museum, and they demonstrate that he was invariably drawn to Japanese woodcuts which showed an awareness of the elements of Western perspective; and it has been suggested that Whistler in turn assimilated Oriental concepts of space into those of Western art. Yet this is precisely what he failed to do; and it is strange that an artist who had shown genuine originality in his own handling of space should have failed to overlook the spatial implications in almost all Japanese art, including that of the popular *ukiyo-e* prints. For while the first impression of these prints is almost always that of a bold surface design which is strikingly decorative, a closer examination shows that they are imbued with spatial sensations which are achieved not only through their own spatial conventions but because the negative spaces, the empty areas, are as highly calculated and important to the whole as are those filled by figures and objects. The result is that just as the tautness of the bounding contours of the flat Japanese figures endows them with a subsidiary three-dimensionality, so do the empty compositional areas slowly yield up sensations of space.

Of all the painters of this generation perhaps only Degas showed an awareness of the importance of negative space and of the spatial complexity of Japanese art, and this awareness was to be a source of enormous strength to his own art. For Whistler the decorative qualities of Japanese art were uppermost, and indeed from some of his remarks one might infer that his purpose was to decorate a canvas rather than to paint a picture. In a letter of 1868 to Fantin-Latour he writes:

> It seems to me, that colour ought... to appear in a picture here and there in the same way a thread appears in an embroidery... in this way the whole will form a harmony. Look how well the Japanese understood this. They never look for contrast, on the contrary, they're after repetition.

In 1866 Whistler made a mysterious visit to Chile, which was at this point fighting a brief naval war with Spain. From there he brought back his first evening or twilight pictures (as opposed to the sunset pictures executed at Trouville in the company of Courbet in 1865, his last year of genuine contact with French painting) and these flow into his first river "moonlights," which were subsequently called *Nocturnes*. And it is in the *Nocturnes*, which have fewer overtly Eastern qualities than the "Japoniste" figure pieces, that the compositional refinement and the decorative sophistication of Japanese art were assimilated to best effect. With his turning away from realism, which had all the fervor of the confirmed debauchee embracing a new mystical religion, the importance of a conceptual manner of work became all important to him.

In his portraits he continued to rely heavily on the model, but the coloristic harmonies and the poses were all very carefully worked out before the canvases were begun, while the riverscapes were the result of the sort of visual and mental discipline that remind one of the teaching of Lecoq that he had absorbed from Fantin-Latour. Whistler would spend hours, sometimes whole nights, on and along the Thames absorbing in silence every visual nuance of atmosphere; subsequently the paintings were executed in the studio, often very quickly, before the visual distillations could fade. This working method led to the heightening of a prevalent color harmony and always to a simplification of color, form, and design. These paintings stand at the opposite end of the spectrum, in every sense, from contemporary French Impressionism, which sought to cultivate an instantaneous response to transitory visual phenomena.

The term "nocturne" was suggested to Whistler by his patron Frederick R. Leyland. In a letter of the early 1870s Whistler replied,

> I can't thank you too much for the name "Nocturne" as a title for my moonlights!... it is really so charming and does so poetically say all I want to say and *no more* than I wish.

The first of Whistler's paintings to have been given a musical title was *Symphony in White, No. 3*, a picture of two young women, dressed of course in white, painted in 1865–1867; subsequently both earlier *White Girl*s got musical subtitles. The idea probably came from the fact that the critic Paul Mantz had talked about *The White Girl* as a "*symphonie du blanc*" when it was shown at the Salon des Refusés in 1863. And once again we are faced by an instance in which the aesthetic implications of Whistler's work are in many ways more important than the paintings themselves.

The concept of the interrelations or correspondences between the arts had been very much in the air for several decades. Baudelaire had written on the subject in the late forties. Gautier, who was a "*peintre manqué*," had consciously attempted to evoke purely visual sensations in his "Symphonie en Blanc Majeur" (published in *Emaux et Camées* in 1852), a work Whistler almost certainly knew. The fact that Henri Murger, a favorite of Whistler's and a popularizer by nature, had a few years earlier made one of his characters compose a symphony on the influence of blue in the arts shows how prevalent such ideas must have been. By the end of the century

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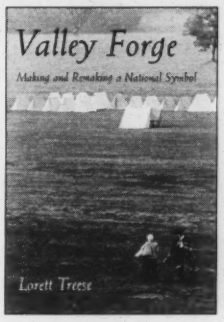

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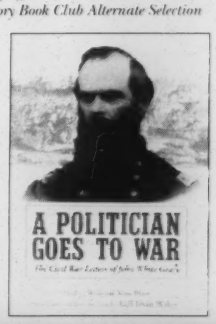

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music was firmly established as queen of the arts because of its non-imitative qualities. And Whistler was a link in the movement toward conceiving painting as music, which achieved its climax with the first coloristic abstractions of Kupka and Kandinsky soon after 1910. It is obviously oversimplifying things to see Whistler as a proto-abstractionist; but if his "Japonisme" had a profound influence on the visual taste of his time, his insistence during the 1870s on the importance of divorcing form from content had an equally potent influence on many subsequent aesthetic theories of visual perception.

I myself always think of Whistler as a painter without a high maturity, possibly because he was, I suspect, one of those people who always think of themselves as being younger than they are, so that he seemed to pass from being *enfant terrible* to *vieillard terrible* with no visible transition. But the *Nocturnes* of the 1870s and the portraits of the early 1870s represent the summit of his career. The reception of his most famous portrait, *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (1871), also serves to underscore the statelessness of Whistler's artistic position. Despite the enthusiasm of Rossetti and Swinburne it was coolly received in England and rejected by the Royal Academy in 1872. Whistler declared that he would never part with the work (although he pawned it twice) but, largely through the offices of Mallarmé, he sold it cheaply to the Musée du Luxembourg in 1891 hoping that it would eventually find its way into the Louvre. It did, in 1925. When it was shown at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art in 1881 it was ignored; but when the painting was returned on loan to America by the Louvre during the Depression it was hailed as a symbol of national identity. It toured a dozen cities and was seen by two million people. Security arrangements were unprecedented; when the picture reached Chicago it was met at the station by a contingent of federal troops led by General Parker. And Mrs. Whistler's final departure from the country was a state occasion, presided over by the President's own mother, Mrs. James Roosevelt, swathed in black satin set off by purple and white orchids. How Whistler would have enjoyed all that.

Ironically the picture had originally looked much more American than it did by then: sparer, flatter, and more direct. By the time that it entered the Luxembourg the canvas had already begun to self-destruct owing to Whistler's reckless technical procedures. Maybe the fact that these had almost immediately given the painting the spurious appearance of a yellowing and decomposing old master added to its extraordinary appeal.[1]

Whistler was in any case by now looking to the past. In 1857 he had traveled to Manchester to the "Art Treasures Exhibition" which included fourteen paintings by or attributed to Velásquez. And Velásquez was to be the prime influence on Whistler's portraiture, which from the mid-1870s onward was to stand at the heart of his work.

Whistler was clearly overwhelmed by Velásquez's elegance and exactitude, by the way in which Velásquez could place a single figure on a neutral ground and then by adjusting its contours, moving them endlessly backward and forward, ultimately find the exact moment of psychological and pictorial truth that was right for both him and his sitter. Whistler comes closest to emulating his mentor in *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 2: Portrait of Thomas Carlyle* (1872–1873), in my view the greatest of all his portraits. Here the craggy bleakness of the great Victorian historian and social critic finds an echo in Whistler's obsession with reductiveness; and the neutral areas around him fill up with space and light, as they invariably do in Velásquez, but so seldom do in Whistler's own production. And whereas the paint quality of Velásquez is characterized by a miraculous shimmer and freshness, despite the laborious processes by which so many of the pictures are achieved, Whistler's practice of applying his paint wetly and thinly (often while the canvas was on the ground) onto almost unprimed canvas, and then frequently scraping and reworking, led all too often to poverty-stricken paint effects. Sometimes one actually gets the sensation that he disliked the very substance of paint; and maybe this accounts for the fact that Whistler is one of the very few major painters one can think of who often look more seductive in reproduction than in, so to speak, the flesh.

During the 1880s Whistler's clientele changed. The respectable Victorian mycenae of the 1870s—such as the Leylands, Huths, and Alexanders—withdrew their portrait commissions after the notorious Ruskin trial, heard on November 26, 1878. This was the result of Whistler's filing suit against the greatest of all English art critics, John Ruskin, who in his periodical *Fors Clavigera* had accused Whistler of "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." (The accusation was in a sense strange since Ruskin was prepared to support Turner's late work, which was often more vaporous and abstract than Whistler's own.)

James McNeill Whistler: The Toilet *(1878)*

Whistler was awarded a farthing's damages; but the trial helped to cripple him financially and led to his bankruptcy the following year, referred to by Rossetti as Whistler's "arrangement in black and white."

Whistler had in any case for some time been cultivating the gentle art of making enemies with truly startling success, and colleagues, patrons, and friends alike were falling off fast. Now it was the "demi-monde" who flocked to his studio, "stunners" and adventuresses like Lady Meux, Lillie Langtry (the portrait of her was destroyed), and the notorious divorceé Lady Colin Campbell; and in his tasteful yet oddly flamboyant depictions of them Whistler began to anticipate the flashy society portraits of the Edwardian age. American clients had remained faithful to him and their portraits had found their way across the Atlantic; and after the unprecedented success of Whistler's exhibition in 1892 at the Goupil Gallery, which set the final seal on his fame as a painter, the British establishment once again made its way to his studio. But he never forgave it and had come to hate his adopted country.

[1] See "Reviving Whistler's Mother," *The Times Literary Supplement* (October 14, 1994), by Sarah Walden, who restored the painting for the Louvre. Her book on the history of the painting and its restoration is awaiting publication.

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By the 1890s Whistler's painting was showing signs of fatigue; the figures become increasingly elongated and insubstantial, the paint less and less eloquent. A self-portrait of 1895–1900, *Brown and Gold*, painted during the last illness of his wife, Beatrice, strikes a genuine note of psychological authenticity, and one senses that his grief and anguish is not only for his dying wife but for himself and for the direction that his art and his career had taken. And for some time now Whistler's greatest successes had been in the field of decoration. The embellishment of his own houses and the design of his exhibition spaces were deemed to be unqualified successes. Their influence can still be felt today in many London houses of cultured people. It is revealing that in Deanna Marohn Bendix's *Diabolical Designs*, a scholarly but entertaining book which focuses on him as a decorator, Whistler's personality comes across every bit as strongly as it does in the literature dedicated to his paintings and graphics.[2]

The current Whistler exhibition being shared between the Tate Gallery, the Musée d'Orsay, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington is the largest and most important since the memorial exhibitions held in Boston, London, and Paris in 1904–1905. The exhibition has been curated by an international team, intelligently and imaginatively, although the bulk of the catalog is by Richard Dorment and Margaret F. MacDonald. A high proportion of works on paper have rightly been included. Whistler's mastery as an etcher was recognized early on (after his discharge from West Point he had worked as an etcher for the US Coast and Geodetic Survey), and his unorthodox methods in the medium produced genuinely original results; the watercolors are among his most exquisite works. And it was in his notations on paper that Whistler's imagination roamed most freely (MacDonald's *Catalogue Raisonné* of the watercolors, pastels, and drawings lists over 1,700 entries.)[3] The *Nocturnes*, seen as a series, look hauntingly beautiful and startlingly original; they were Whistler's greatest achievement.

But the opportunity for a major reassessment of Whistler's art has been hampered badly by the fact that the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, is not allowed by its charter to lend or borrow, although it continues to acquire new works. The Freer is home to Whistler's "Japonisme." It contains the famous Peacock Room, Whistler's "adaptation" in 1876 of the dining room at 49 Prince's Gate, his patron Leyland's London residence. The project (and the costs) escalated until it became in effect Whistler's creation; inevitably it brought about a bitter rupture between the patron and the painter, but it remains the most lavish and spectacular of all Whistler's decorations and the climax of his Japanese phase; recently refurbished it is indeed a spectacle to behold. The Freer also owns the most important of Whistler's Orientalizing canvases, including the ravishing *Six Projects*—although these might more accurately be described as Greco-Japanese—the collective name given to six oil sketches Whistler made for a putative frieze of figures, commissioned once again by Leyland.

Visitors to the exhibition in Washington will be able to wander over to the Freer; but the absence of these paintings in London and Paris is badly felt. Whistler's "Japonisme" was at the core of his art. His adoption of it was linked to his turning violently against Realism and marked the beginning of his commitment to an aristocratic interpretation of the idea of art as something apart, something to be produced and enjoyed by the very few. But "Japonisme" was also his escape hatch, a magical mantle which he draped around himself and which allowed him to isolate himself not only from much of what was going on around him but also from certain deficiencies in his own talent. The conventions of Japanese art encouraged him to take shortcuts in his own.

The exhibition confirms what many critics and commentators, from Whistler's own most important disciple, Walter Sickert, onward, have suggested: that Whistler was an evasive artist. And for all his great gifts and inordinate ambitions, true greatness in turn evaded him.

The catalog entries are exemplary but at times somewhat repetitive, because although the exhibition has been assembled in a roughly chronological sequence, the catalog has been broken down into themes—"Jo," "The Thames," "Valparaiso," and so forth. Dorment's great contribution to Whistler scholarship is to demonstrate Whistler's indebtedness to the technique of English watercolor painting which deeply influenced his own oils; this had been remarked on, once again, by Sickert, but is here explored in depth. Dorment also underlines the importance for Whistler of the series of exhibitions of British portraiture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at the South Kensington Museum in 1866, 1867, and 1868. A total of 2,846 portraits went on view; and Dorment rightly attributes to the American the desire to reinstate, through portraiture, the "grand manner" in British art.

For well over half a century Whistler's personal myth, which he was at such pains to foster, often at the expense of the truth, has helped to divert attention from the art itself; and the picture we have of Whistler is not so much that of the obsessive artist that he in fact was but rather that of a flamboyant personality who painted. A new biography by Ronald Anderson and Anne Koval, which has been fifteen years in the making, does much to separate the facts from the fantasy. It plays down the personal pyrotechnics, contains a wealth of new factual material, and is valuable to have; but it is also very long and less enjoyable to read than the monographs by James Laver and Denys Sutton. And nothing can ever detract from the enduring freshness of the reminiscences of Whistler's disciples Elizabeth and Joseph Pennell, first published in

[2]Deanna Marohn Bendix, *Diabolical Designs: Paintings, Interiors, and Exhibitions of James McNeill Whistler* (Smithsonian, 1995).

[3]*James McNeill Whistler: Watercolors, Pastels, and Drawings: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Yale University Press, 1995).

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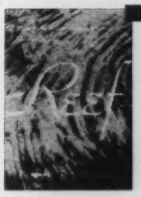

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1908. They saw Whistler as the greatest genius of his age.

The reissue in an attractive facsimile of *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, a collection of writings put together by Whistler himself which first appeared in 1890, and another volume of selected letters and further writings entitled *Whistler on Art* help to confirm the impression that we are never going to be able to forget the public persona and concentrate on the art. And this is largely Whistler's own doing; he was, quite simply, one of the greatest exhibitionists of all time. He was also one of the greatest of haters and in return it is hard to warm to him posthumously. The fascination Whistler held for so many stars of the French literary world, from Mallarmé and Huysmans through to the young Proust, is now hard to explain, although Edgar Munhall's elegant and urbane *Whistler and Montesquiou*,[4] which charts the course of the friendship between the painter and the poet who was one of the models for Proust's Baron Charlus, does evoke some of the charm Whistler was capable of exercising. It may be, too, that in his affectations of speech, gait, and dress, and in his painted face, these writers saw some of the last tangible vestiges of the artificial dandy figure created by Baudelaire some fifty years before. And despite the vulgarity and the vituperation, the posing and the paranoia, Whistler did live his life with a certain hysterical courage which commands a measure of respect. Very late in life, during a bout of ill health, he made quite a good joke about his being "lowered in tone: probably the result of living in the midst of English pictures." To which, when all is said and done, one can only regretfully add, his own, too. □

[4] *Whistler and Montesquiou: The Butterfly and the Bat* (Frick Collection/Flammarion, 1995). An exhibition featuring Whistler's *Arrangement in Black and Gold: Comte Robert de Montesquiou* will be held at the Frick Collection from November 1995 through January 1996.

The Abuse of McNamara

Theodore Draper

The vitriolic and protracted campaign in *The New York Times* against former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and his new book, *In Retrospect*, is largely based on a false premise, one that can be best demonstrated by *The New York Times* of over twenty years ago.

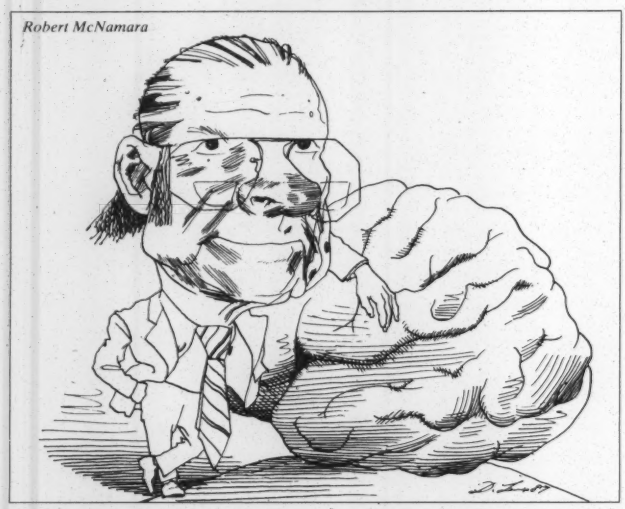
On April 12, the lead editorial stated: "Mr. McNamara wants us to know that he, too, realized by 1967 that the dissidents were right, that the war had to be stopped to avoid 'a major national disaster.' " Then it goes on: "Even so, he wants us to grant that his delicate sense of protocol excused him from any obligation to join the national debate over whether American troops should continue to die at the rate of hundreds per week in a war he knew to be futile."

On April 16, the lead review in *The New York Times Book Review* by Max Frankel begins: "In his 79th year, Robert S. McNamara at long last offers the public a glimpse of his aching conscience. The most willful Vietnam warrior in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, he was also the first at the top to admit defeat, in private." The words "in private" should be emphasized. Later, Frankel convicts McNamara of refusing "once out of office, to share his policy disagreements with the country."

Also on April 16, Frank Rich joined in the attack on McNamara who, Rich wrote, "took his charts to Washington, where he used them to prolong a war whose body count totaled 58,000 American and some 3 million Vietnamese lives," as if McNamara alone had prolonged the entire war.

On April 17, the why-didn't-he-speak-up-sooner line of attack on McNamara was made even more explicitly by Anthony Lewis. For him, McNamara's "greater wrong" was in "failing to speak the truth then, when it mattered." After summarizing McNamara's thoughts on the war in 1965, 1966, and 1967, Lewis claims: "But Mr. McNamara said none of that in public at the time." Finally, Lewis charges: "Many have noted that 58,000 Americans and more than 3 million Vietnamese died in that war while Robert McNamara and many others swallowed their doubts."

Again on April 17, the theme was picked up by Robert MacNeil on *The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour* during an interview with McNamara: "Many people are saying, reviewers, television interviewers, others, that you should have aired your doubts twenty-seven years ago." McNamara answered: "What should I have said that would not have brought aid and comfort to the enemy?" He might also have answered that his doubts had been aired twenty-four years ago.



Robert McNamara

In short, the case against McNamara largely hinges on the premise that he did not express his doubts about the Vietnam War while it was going on and that he waited until 1995 to make known his views on "whether American troops should continue to die."

As I tried to show in my review of McNamara's book in the last issue of *The New York Review*, it is open to criticism on various counts. But one thing that cannot be held against McNamara is that no one knew about his views on the war during the war. Anyone who read *The New York Times* in 1971 knew. In fact, McNamara's book is not notable for any revelations about the course of the war. Its main interest is in McNamara's repeated expressions of regret and remorse for what the Kennedy and Johnson administrations did and did not do.

McNamara did not have much new to tell about his disillusionment with the war, because it had already been told in detail in the Pentagon Papers. He was responsible for collecting them in the first place. In July 1967, McNamara asked John McNaughton, his Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, to collect documents on the war for the use of future scholars. This collection was leaked to *The New York Times*, which courageously fought off a government attempt to stop it from publishing the documents.

The oddest thing about the highly censorious references to McNamara's book is the fact that the *Times* published the Pentagon Papers with McNamara's knowledge and approval. The *Times* writers could have read McNamara's account in his book of how he knew of and approved publication. McNamara tells how the *Times*'s then Washington bureau chief, James ("Scotty") Reston, was dining at McNamara's home on June 14, 1971. A telephone call came for Reston, telling him that Attorney General John Mitchell was trying to prevent publication of the papers. Reston asked McNamara what he thought. "I said," McNamara writes, "the *Times* should continue printing them but should hedge its position by making clear it would obey any order issued by the Supreme Court."[1] Thus McNamara knew in advance that he was going "to share his policy disagreements with the country" (Frankel) and that he was not one of those who "swallowed their doubts" (Lewis).

The *New York Times* had begun publishing the Pentagon Papers on June 13, 1971. The Vietnam War was still on; the US phase of the war lasted two more years. After publication in *The New York Times* the entire series came out in book form in July 1971. The book is more easily available to interested readers than the newspaper and is best cited here.[2]

Chapter 9 is headed: "Secretary McNamara's Disenchantment: October, 1966–May, 1967." It is divided into a summary by Hedrick Smith, followed by a section of supporting documents. Smith noted: "Mr. McNamara's disillusionment with the war has been reported previously, but the depth of his dissent from established policy is documented for the first time in the Pentagon study, which he commissioned on June 17, 1967." After summarizing McNamara's efforts to scale down the US effort in the war, Smith states: "The Pentagon study underscores the significance of Mr. McNamara's break with policy." McNamara's failure to sway Johnson is conveyed in these words: "But in a series of decisions on the air war during July and August [1968], the President adopted a course that differed markedly from the strategy of de-escalation that Secretary McNamara had urged on him."

The documents in the Pentagon Papers are almost exactly the same as those given in McNamara's book. McNamara's first misgivings appear in a memorandum to Johnson of November 30, 1965. This was only four months after the announcement by President Johnson escalating the US role in the war. In his memo, McNamara said that the United States faced a "choice" between accepting a "compromise solution" or increasing the US forces in Vietnam as requested by General William Westmoreland.[3]

On October 14, 1966, McNamara sent Johnson a memorandum in which he struck a note that is a central theme

[1] *In Retrospect* (Times Books, 1995), p. 281.

[2] A cloth edition was published by Quadrangle and a paperback by Bantam. A five-volume edition of the complete papers was issued by Beacon in 1971.

[3] The memorandum of November 30, 1965, did not spell out what McNamara meant by a "compromise solution." In his book, McNamara says that it entailed "less than our objective of an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam" (p. 222). Even this formula shows that McNamara was vaguely groping for an alternative to escalation and was merely starting to question the goal of a military victory by increasing US ground forces and bombing.

in his book. "This important war," he declared, "must be fought and won by the Vietnamese themselves. We have known this from the beginning. But the discouraging truth is that, as was the case in 1961 and 1963 and 1965, we have not found the formula, the catalyst, for training and inspiring them into effective action." Nevertheless, he still expressed hope that some way might be found to turn the Vietnamese factor around.

Finally, on May 19, 1967, McNamara sent Johnson a crucial memorandum, parts of which cover seven pages in the Pentagon Papers. In effect, it virtually gave up on the South Vietnamese and recommended "a politico-military strategy that raised the possibility of compromise." Some of its passages reveal the tenor of McNamara's thoughts and feelings at the time:

> The Vietnam war is unpopular in this country. It is becoming increasingly unpopular as it escalates—causing more American casualties, more fear of its growing into wider war, more privation of the domestic sector, and more distress at the amount of suffering being visited on the noncombatants in Vietnam, South and North. Most Americans do not know how we got where we are, and most, without knowing why, but taking advantage of hindsight, are convinced that somehow we should not have gotten this deeply in. All want the war ended and expect their President to end it. Successfully, or else.
>
> The use of tactical nuclear and area-denial-radiological-bacteriological-chemical weapons would probably be suggested at some point if the Chinese entered the war in Vietnam or Korea or if U.S. losses were running high while conventional efforts were not producing desired results.
>
> There may be a limit beyond which many Americans and much of the world will not permit the United States [bombing] to go. The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1000 noncombatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one.
>
> (1) Our commitment is only to see that the people of South Vietnam are permitted to determine their own future.
>
> (2) This commitment ceases if the country ceases to help itself.[4]

On November 1, 1967, another McNamara memorandum proposed stabilizing the fronts, halting the bombing of North Vietnam, and seeking to bring about negotiations. It was McNamara's last word on Vietnam to Johnson.

All this and more has been known since 1971. It is true that McNamara never made his views of 1965–1967 known before publishing his recent book; the fact is, however, that they were made known for him in the Pentagon Papers. Much in his book is merely a recapitulation of those documents. Once he concluded that the United States could not win militarily in Vietnam, he sought for two years, with growing conviction and without success, to persuade the President and his colleagues to pull back from escalating the war and to seek some way out of it by trying to negotiate a compromise. In 1967, he was almost the only voice within the top echelons of the administration to give up the goal of military victory and to seek some way out of the war by negotiation.

McNamara never went so far as to call for withdrawal from the war. He regrets it now. But it is unfair to accuse him of not sharing his policy disagreements with the country, of swallowing his doubts while millions of Americans and Vietnamese died, or to make him the scapegoat for prolonging the entire war. *The New York Times* enabled him to share his policy disagreements with the country, to reveal his doubts, and to show that he made some effort not to prolong the war.

McNamara's behavior reflected the political culture of the United States. In this tradition, a cabinet officer is not an elected official and serves at the behest of the President. If he disagrees with the President and decides to leave office, he is expected to do so quietly and with a minimum of fuss. This was the course taken by Dean Acheson in the 1930s and by Cyrus Vance in the late 1970s. For McNamara to have acted differently and to have declared political war on Lyndon Johnson in the midst of the Vietnam War would have represented a breach with the American political culture. He did not take that step for at least two reasons. For one thing, McNamara's doubts about the war were still not fully developed; they were enough to make him a pariah to the military leaders but far from fully formed enough to send him into the streets. For another thing, he was obviously shaken by his experiences in the Johnson administration and could not shift from supporting the war to actively opposing it.

Whatever McNamara's shortcomings, it is bizarre to attack him now for the wrong reasons. McNamara was not the arch-villain of the war, and he deserves credit for trying to make amends for the damage that he and his colleagues in the administration did thirty years ago.[5] □

[4]These passages are quoted from McNamara's book, pp. 266–270. Only the third of them appears in *The New York Times* edition of the Pentagon Papers. Nevertheless, Hedrick Smith commented, "Let there be no mistake, these were radical positions for a senior US policy official within the Johnson administration to take."

[5]The reader may wonder why I have written this note. I do not know McNamara and have no connection with him. I happen to have been one of the earliest critics and opponents of the Vietnam War. I contributed articles against the war to *The New York Review of Books* and *Commentary* (in its pre-neoconservative phase) in 1966 and 1967, and brought out a book critical of the war, *Abuse of Power*, in 1967 (Viking). One of its readers was Robert Kennedy, who told his first biographer, Jack Newfield, that *Abuse of Power* "was one of the very best about Vietnam, even though it isn't too kind to me and my friends" (*Robert Kennedy*, Dutton, 1969, p. 132). My sole reason is that I have been dismayed by the abuse of Robert McNamara.

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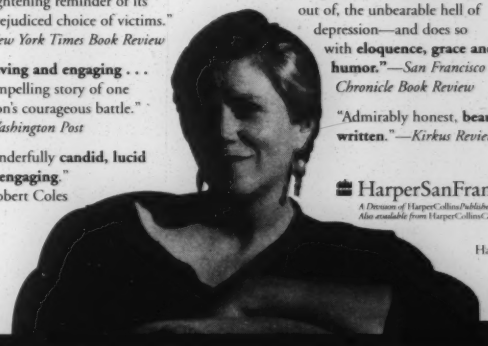

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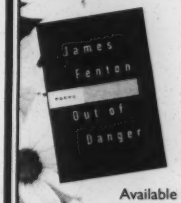

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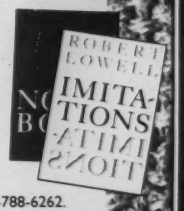

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Nadar's Swift Tact

John Updike

Nadar
an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, April 14–July 9, 1995

Nadar
catalog of the exhibition by Maria Morris Hambourg, Françoise Heilbrun, and Philippe Néagu, with contributions by Sylvie Aubenas, André Jammes, Ulrich Keller, Sophie Rochard, and André Rouillé.
Metropolitan Museum of Art/Abrams, 272 pp., $60.00; $40.00 (paper)

Photography is a matter of time. The time of exposure is part of a photograph's credentials, and from even mediocre photographs flows the uncanny power of temporal authenticity: things looked this way at one certain moment in the past, a moment now irrevocably gone. Painting, for all its documentary value, has little such power, only an idealizing Platonic strength: the heroic age of American politics ended when, beginning with William Henry Harrison and John Tyler, presidents could be photographed, in all their warty imperviousness to the glamorization of brush strokes. We trust the camera—mechanical, dispassionate, mindless—but not the painter, who inevitably has some kind of myopia or an axe to grind.

And yet photographers tend to burn out, at the level which generates enduring quality in a medium so copious. A peculiar kind of intensity must function behind the lens, along with a lucky tilt from the Zeitgeist. Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (1820–1910), known professionally as Nadar, devoted rather little of his long and busy life to being a portrait photographer, but the six years in which he seriously practiced this fledgling profession have secured him posterity's acclaim and a contemporary show of one hundred photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The son of a Lyons printer and publisher who moved to Paris three years before Félix was born, Nadar, as he called himself after 1838, underwent a bourgeois education until 1836, when he was expelled for unruly behavior from the Collège Bourbon. The following year, his father's death reduced the family fortune, though Félix briefly attended medical school in Lyons. By 1838 he was back in Paris, and had soon dropped out of medical studies and had joined the large population of struggling young writers who tried to extract a living from the welter of ephemeral magazines; he helped edit one of the more luxurious journals, *Livre d'or*, until it consumed the inheritance of its young patron and folded. The poor "water-drinkers" of the Latin Quarter and their female companions led "*la vie de Bohème*," which was rendered famous in the series of articles written in the mid-1840s by Nadar's friend Henri Murger, and a half-century later turned by Puccini into grand opera.

As a caricaturist, Nadar was no Daumier but as good as many who wielded this once widespread skill. As a writer, he was fluent and lively but lacked, perhaps, that devotion to reality in its exact details which characterizes literary masters. Six feet tall, red-haired, gregarious, self-promoting, and cheerfully enterprising, he not only practiced art but became a kind of culture vulture, a highly sociable head collector who claimed to enjoy five thousand friendships among Paris's cultural elite and who had a genuine, disarmingly selfless gift of admiration. He conceived of an ambitious caricatural "pantheon" of one thousand writers and artists of the day, in four giant posters to be sold for twenty francs apiece, and completed only one, which sold a mere 136 copies and was then banned by the minister of the interior, in 1854. Also in 1854 Nadar married a nicely dowered eighteen-year-old Protestant from Normandy and with a friend's help set up his unemployed younger brother, Adrien, in a photography studio on the boulevard des Capucines. With the advent of the collodion-on-glass negative and the paper print, the speed and ease of photography had greatly increased, and the number of photographers in Paris shot up. Adrien, who aspired to be a painter, learned the technical fundamentals quickly from the well-named Gustave Le Gray. But by the end of the year the studio was failing, and Nadar stepped in to save it, absorbing the basics by the way. Thus sideslippingly a great photographer was born.

Nadar: Marie Laurent, circa 1856

He began to practice in his house on the rue Saint-Lazare, using the sunlit garden as a studio and friendly fellow artists as subjects. He was a staunch Republican (in the French sense) and worked best with people he admired, either politically or artistically. He took his time with each session, establishing rapport with the subject and adjusting the reflectors with which he lovingly manipulated the natural light to produce chiaroscuro effects akin to those of Rembrandt and Van Dyck. In a description of his photographic artistry (bellicosely framed in a legal combat with his brother):

> What can't be learned, I will tell you: it's the sense of light, it's the artistic appreciation of the effects produced by different and combined qualities of light...
>
> What can be learned still less is the moral intelligence of your subject, it's the swift tact that puts you in communion with the model...
>
> What also can't be learned is integrity of work: in a genre as delicate as portraiture, it's zeal, the search, an indefatigable perseverance in the relentless pursuit of the *best*.

He was a bohemian snob, whose abjuration of furniture and trappings distinguished his work from the cluttered style of studios catering to the bourgeoisie, and who sometimes draped his subjects in costumes of a picturesque informality. Yet during the 1850s he not only made great portraits but made money; he charged as much as a hundred francs for the privilege of a sitting, no doubt adjusting this downward for worthy acquaintances like Baudelaire, Gautier, Berlioz, Michelet, Daumier, and Delacroix. There was a commercial cunning as well as a romanticism to his elitist standards; Elizabeth Anne McCauley, in her excellent *Industrial Madness: Commercial Photography in Paris, 1848–1871*,* titles her chapter on Nadar "Nadar and the Selling of Bohemia." His austere, unhurried approach was "appreciated," she writes, "by sitters who cared to be different," including some from the aristocracy.

Adrien Tournachon—"erratic, querulous, boastful," a wall caption tells us—was an embarrassment to Nadar and remains one to Nadar scholars. For some months the brothers operated the boulevard des Capucines studio together, and a number of the finest photographs, including a spectacular series of the seventeen-year-old mime Charles Deburau dressed in the voluminous white clown costume of Pierrot, are signed by Adrien, as "Nadar jeune." The "jeune" became a barely discernible "jne" and the original Nadar, after a year of contention, sued to get his pseudonym back. Françoise Heilbrun, in her essay on the photographs in the handsome, essay-laden exhibition catalog, protests rather too much that no photograph of genius could be by Adrien, even when stamped by him and in his characteristic format. "To my mind," however, the picture can essentially be attributed to Félix," she writes in one instance, and of the beautiful Pierrot series says they were "clearly" "taken in collaboration with his brother." Well, couldn't even Adrien have got lucky for a second? Might the brothers' brief collaboration not have been a two-way street, even though Adrien never succeeded on his own, abandoned his studio in 1860, and died in a mental hospital?

From 1855 to 1860 is the brief heyday of Nadar *aîné* as a hands-on, eyes-on photographer. In 1860, after his mother had died in the house on the rue Saint-Lazare, he bought out his brother's equipment and built himself a two-story glass atelier atop a building on the boulevard des Capucines, adorned with his giant, gaslit signature. But the bourgeois clients he needed to attract, and the oval vignettes and little *cartes de visite* they expected, bored him, and he left the day-to-day work to his staff, lending his superb personal touch to rare sitters like George Sand and Sarah Bernhardt, in the mid-1860s. He continued to cut a figure in Paris, however, pioneering photography by electric light in the catacombs and sewers of Paris and then aerial photography, taking shots of Paris from balloons. A great admirer of modern inventions, he managed, at ruinous cost, to construct—from twelve miles of silk!—the largest balloon in the world, called Le Géant, which he launched from a number of European capitals. Of balloon flight he rhapsodized:

> Free, calm, levitating into the silent immensities of welcoming, beneficent space, where no human

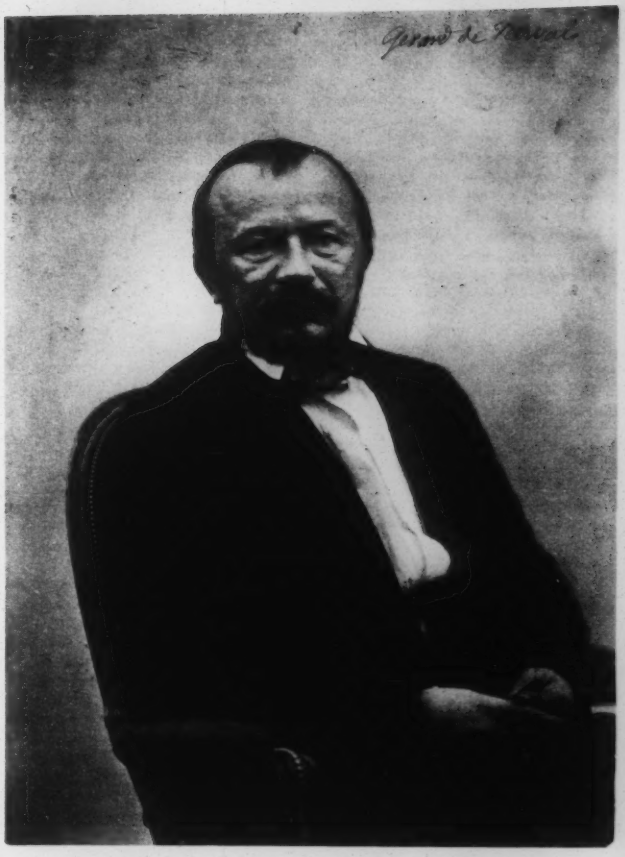
*Yale University Press, 1995.

force, no power of evil can reach him, a man seems to feel himself really living for the first time, rejoicing in a sense of spiritual and bodily well-being of a fullness never before known.

As early as the early 1870s, Nadar was letting his son Paul run the studio, now moved to the rue d'Anjou. He wrote a number of reminiscences in his high-flown, adjectival style and, the year before he died, sent a telegram of congratulation to Louis Blériot, the first man to fly the English Channel. Under the management of Paul and Nadar's wife, Ernestine, the firm turned a profit on its great name but produced commonplace work. Paul died in 1939 and during the war the Nadar archives were pillaged by collectors. Only recently has the immense task been undertaken of sifting from the great mass of Nadar Studio plates and prints the precious images, often preserved in a single paper proof print run up for the customer's inspection, which Nadar captured in his brief period of creativity.

He was, in short, a restless, dabbling, flamboyant spirit, who could have found great distinction in perhaps no art save photography. A photographic portrait is a matter of interaction; the photographer's animation and charm spread to the sitter. Rossini's pouchy eyes glint with amusement; Michelet seems to be biting back an apt riposte on the tip of his tongue; the vaudevillian Pierre-Alfred Ravel is so amused his face is blurred a bit out of focus. A cocky sense of confrontation sparks the faces of Dumas *père* and the famous clown Kopp. The poets are hauntingly vivid: Gérard de Nerval, who will commit suicide within a year of his portrait, gazes directly into the lens with a moist stare, and Baudelaire, in a pair of very different exposures, displays, standing, a frantic edge and then, seated, a handsome, intelligent repose. The four photographs of Daumier are especially electric, in the unmediated clarity with which the man stands close before us, his stocky build, swaddled in a featureless black coat, topped by a half-illumined face shockingly modern in its weary alertness and nervous preoccupation. He seems truly to have forgotten he is being photographed, no small feat in a time when the fastest exposures were over a second in length. We feel a leap between this tousled, acute, unsmiling presence and the rotund crayonned forms of his human satire. As a rule Nadar's photographs are chastely untheatrical; and the ones that do attempt a dramatic gesture —those of Charles Couderc and Jean Journet, for instance—are the ones that appear dated.

The dignity of Nadar's method irradiates his dozen or so pictures of women. There is no obvious prettifying, and no playful condescension. In an age and country that did not hide its erotic exploitation of the female underclass from which artists' models were generally drawn, Nadar allows women of this class the same grave inwardness as the writers and upper-class wives. The photo of a nameless model "brought," it is noted on the back, to Nadar's studio by the boulevardier Louis Lherminier, contains a challenging and composed gaze beneath the spectacular spread of unbound hair; the wall and catalog commentary permits itself a leer (she "has undone her hair and perhaps much else") but the photographer does not leer at all.



Nadar and Adrien Tournachon: Gérard de Nerval, 1854–1855

Nadar: Maria, 1856–1859

The body does not much interest him; the small semi-draped figure titled "Mimi" is quite ethereal and distant, though the commentary insists, "the easy attitude of the woman's pale, thin body and her beguiling regard confirm her membership in the eternal sorority of Mimis." That is, she is a whore. But the dignity and facial piquancy of the two photos of the black model Maria silence comment, though one pose shows her "opulent breasts." In the only total nude in the catalog (not in the show) Nadar makes the frontal figure a twisted column of light, an Ingres translated into flesh. The model has been permitted or instructed to cover her face with her arm, a discretion also observable in the clinical shot of a hermaphrodite taken in 1860.

Not that Nadar has no capacity for glamorization: his "Young woman in profile" is startlingly beautiful, as his image of Aimé Millet is romantically handsome; photographs of the onyx-eyed young Sarah Bernhardt, of Marie Laurent from the back, and of the aging but jauntily posed singer Rosine Stoltz all show the willingness to let women present themselves to advantage. Indeed, throughout, Nadar's photographs to a remarkable degree express the kindness and warmth of the photographer: a fruit, perhaps, of his independence in his first years as a photographer, when celebrity had not commercialized his name.

Even those who possess the excellent catalog with its big illustrations should see the show itself. The photographs—some smaller, some bigger than reproduced, and some considerably milkier than in the catalog—have a tone and a dimension that the most scrupulous five-color reproduction cannot capture. Only a viewing of the real prints delivers a sharp sense, in the finger-smudges and chemical spatters, of a precarious process and a precarious survival. These little, irregularly cut pieces of paper—big prints for their time—were pulled, many only once, from negatives now lost or deteriorated beyond use. Even if the negatives were perfectly preserved, Ulrich Keller points out in his catalog essay, modern photographic technology, with its "harsh, high-contrast prints" could not reproduce the "soft, transparent complexion" of Nadar's salted-paper prints. On file for decades, these prints were saved in part by Nadar's own solicitude for his artistic prime, and were marked in his sometimes shaky hand with the name of the sitter. By the time of his labeling a whole vanished era lived in them, lit by the flare of his brief brilliance. □

Downhill All the Way

The Age of Extremes:
A History of the World, 1914–1991
by Eric Hobsbawm.
Pantheon, 627 pp., $30.00

Tony Judt

Among historians in the English-speaking world there is a discernible "Hobsbawm generation." It consists of men and women who took up the study of the past at some point in the "long nineteen-sixties," between, say, 1959 and 1975, and whose interest in the recent past was irrevocably shaped by Eric Hobsbawm's writings, however much they now dissent from many of his conclusions. In those years he published a quite astonishing body of influential work: *Primitive Rebels*, which first appeared in 1959, introduced young urban students to a world of rural protest in Europe and overseas that has now become much more familiar to us, in large measure thanks to the work of scholars whose imaginations were first fired by Hobsbawm's little book. *Labouring Men, Industry and Empire* and *Captain Swing* (with George Rude) substantially recast the economic history of Britain and the story of the British labor movement; they brought back to scholarly attention a half-buried tradition of British radical historiography, reinvigorating research into the conditions and experiences of the artisans and workers themselves, but bringing to this engaged concern an unprecedented level of technical sophistication and a rare breadth of knowledge.

If the conclusions and interpretations of these books seem conventional today, that is only because it is difficult now to remember what their subject matter looked like before Hobsbawm made it his own. No amount of revisionist sniping or fashionable amendment can detract from the lasting impact of this body of work.

But Hobsbawm's most enduring imprint on our historical consciousness has come through his great trilogy on the "long nineteenth century," from 1789 to 1914, the first volume of which, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848*, appeared in 1962. It is hard to assess the influence of that book precisely because it has become so indelibly part of our sense of the period that all subsequent work either unconsciously incorporates it or else works against it. Its overall scheme, interpreting the era as one of social upheaval dominated by the emergence and rise to influence of the bourgeoisie of northwest Europe, eventually became the "conventional" interpretation, now exposed to steady criticism and revision. It was followed in 1975 by *The Age of Capital*, a masterly survey of the middle years of the last century that drew on a remarkable range of material and depth of understanding. That book remains, in my view, Hobsbawm's single greatest work, drawing together the many mid-Victorian transformations of the world and framing them in a unified and still forceful historical narrative. In *The Age of Empire*, which appeared twelve years later, there was an unmistakable elegiac air, as though the leading historian of the last century were somehow sorry to see it come to a close at his hands. The overall impression is of an era of protean change, where a high price was paid for the rapid accumulation of wealth and knowledge; but an era, nonetheless, that was full of promise and of optimistic visions of radiant and improving futures. The nineteenth century, as Hobsbawm reminds us in his latest book, was "my period"; like Marx, he is at his best as a dissector of its hidden patterns, and he left little doubt of his admiration and respect for its astonishing achievements.

It comes, therefore, as a surprise that Eric Hobsbawm should have chosen to add a fourth volume dealing with the "Short Twentieth Century." As he admits in the preface, "I avoided working on the era since 1914 for most of my career." He offers conventional grounds for this aversion: we are too close to the events to be dispassionate (in Hobsbawm's case, born in 1917, he has lived through most of them), a full body of interpretative material is not yet at hand, and it is too soon to tell what it all means.

But it is clear that there is another reason, and one which Hobsbawm himself would certainly not disavow: the twentieth century has ended with the apparent collapse of the political and social ideals and institutions to which he has been committed for most of his life. It is hard not to see in it a dark and gloomy tale of error and disaster. Like the other members of a remarkable generation of British Communist or ex-Communist historians (Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Edward Thompson) Hobsbawm directed his professional attention to the revolutionary and radical past, and not only because the Party line made it virtually impossible to write openly about the near present. For a lifelong Communist who is also a serious scholar, the history of our century presents a number of near insuperable obstacles to interpretation, as his latest work inadvertently demonstrates.

Nonetheless, Hobsbawm has written what is in many ways an extraordinary book. Its argument is explicit and directly reflected in its tripartite structure. The first section, "The Age of Catastrophe," covers the period from the outbreak of World War I to the defeat of Hitler; the second, "The Golden Age," is an account of the remarkable and unprecedented era of economic growth and social transformation that began around 1950 and ended in the mid-Seventies, provoking "The Landslide," as Hobsbawm calls the third and final section of his book, which deals with the history of the last two decades. Each section has a dominant theme, against which are set the details of its history. For the decades following the assassination at Sarajevo, the author depicts a world stumbling for forty years "from one calamity to another," an era of misery and horrors, a time when millions of refugees wandered helplessly across the European subcontinent and when the laws of war, so painstakingly forged over the previous centuries, were abandoned wholesale. (Of 5.5 million Russian prisoners of war in World War II, approximately 3.3 million died, one statistic among many that would have been utterly inconceivable to an earlier generation.)

Of the "Golden Age" following World War II, Hobsbawm notes that it was the moment when, for 80 percent of humankind, the Middle Ages finally ended, a time of dramatic social change and dislocation in Europe no less than in the colonial world over which the European powers now relinquished their control. But the explosive success of postwar Western capitalism, generating economic growth at an unprecedented rate while distributing the benefits of that growth to an ever-increasing number of people, carried within it the seeds of its own corruption and dissolution. It is not for nothing that Eric Hobsbawm has acquired a reputation for sophisticated and subtle Marxist readings of his material.

The expectations and institutions set in motion by the experience of rapid expansion and innovation have bequeathed to us a world with few recognizable landmarks or inherited practices, lacking continuity and solidarity between generations or across occupations. To take but one example, the democratization of knowledge and resources (including weapons) and their concentration in uncontrolled private hands threaten to undermine the very institutions of the capitalist world which brought them about. Without shared practices, common cultures, collective aspirations, ours is a world "which [has] lost its bearings and slid into instability and crisis."

In short, Eric Hobsbawm's history of the twentieth century is the story of the decline of a civilization, the history of a world which has both brought to full flowering the material and cultural potential of the nineteenth century and betrayed its promise. In wartime certain states have reverted to the use of chemical weapons upon unarmed civilians (their own included, in the case of Iraq); the social and environmental inequities arising from uncontrolled market forces are on the rise, while any collective sense of shared interests and inheritances is shrinking fast. In politics, "the decline of the organized mass parties, class-based, ideological or both, [has] eliminated the major social engine for turning men and women into politically active citizens." In cultural matters everything is now "post-" something:

> post-industrial, post-imperial, post-modern, post-structuralist, post-Marxist, post-Gutenberg, or whatever. Like funerals, these prefixes [take] official recognition of death without implying any consensus or indeed certainty about the nature of life after death.

There is a Jeremiah-like air of impending doom about much of Hobsbawm's account.

However, this does not detract from its strengths. Like everything else Hobsbawm has written, "the age of extremes" is described and analyzed in simple, clean prose, utterly free of jargon, pomposity, and pretension. Important points are made in brief, striking, often witty phrases: the political impact of World War I is captured in the observation that "no old government was left standing between the borders of France and the Sea of Japan"; we are reminded of Hitler's low estimation of democracies—"The only democracy he took seriously was the British, which he rightly regarded as not entirely democratic." Hobsbawm's own rather low opinion of the New Left of the Sixties is made explicit:

> At the very moment when hopeful young leftists were quoting Mao Tse-tung's strategy for the triumph of revolution by mobilizing the countless rural millions against the encircled urban strongholds of the status quo, those millions were abandoning their villages and moving into the cities themselves.[1]

The reference to the peasant millions is a reminder that though unashamedly Eurocentric, Eric Hobsbawm has a unique range.[2] His sympathetic and firsthand knowledge of Latin America in particular enriches his account of the worldwide impact of the Depression, just as his comparison of Poland's Solidarity with the Brazilian Workers' Party, both of them nationwide popular labor movements that developed during the Eighties in opposition to the politics of a repressive regime, is suggestive and original. To be sure, his omnivorous reading is directed toward the South rather than the East, with unfortunate results to be discussed below; but he has apparently kept up his close acquaintance with the literature on Peruvian radicals and Neapolitan bandits (and with the men themselves), which he uses to telling effect in his discussion of social and economic transformations in backward societies. And he can with equal ease introduce evidence from the 1982 *Food and Food Production Encyclopedia* (an article on "Formed, Fabricated and Restructured Meat Products") to make a point about consumerism.

This book is also a reminder that Eric Hobsbawm is by training and inclination an economic historian, and an analytical one at that. He is at his best when discussing the Depression, or the nature and consequences of the postwar "boom," and mostly avoids military or political narrative. His descriptions of the economic absurdities of the Soviet world ("an energy-producing colony of more advanced industrial economies—i.e., in practice largely its own Western satellites") or of socialist economics as a "rather archaic industrial system based on iron and smoke" are distinctly superior to his political surveys of those same societies.

In a similar way he is more at ease when treating fascism as a product of the world economic crisis than in his rather brief discussion of its political sources. His account of the dramatic collapse of Communist regimes in 1989 verges on the economically determinist; this is not to deny that debt crises and economic mismanagement were important factors in the downfall of Communism—far from it; but in discussing them Hobsbawm is clearly on familiar territory, where he prefers to remain. However this gives considerable strength to his account of Western developments since the turning point of 1974. He gives a clear and convincing analysis of the long-term dilemmas of the international economy. Equally lucid is his description of the crisis of national welfare economics that arose when national leaders sought to avert the political costs of economic downturn by taxing a shrinking working population to subsidize the victims of their policies.

Despite this emphasis on long-term economic trends and broad secular patterns (a feature of all Hobsbawm's writing), *The Age of Extremes* is also his most personal book; indeed the mood oscillates between a rather formal interpretative perspective and a close, almost private, commentary. He says that he has studied the twentieth century by "watching and listening," and we believe him.[3] The inflation after World War I is caught in the image of his Austrian grandfather cashing in his matured insurance policy and finding himself with just enough money for a drink at his favorite café, while Hobsbawm's own aesthetic distaste at the urban blight of the Sixties is contrasted with childhood memories of "the great architectural monuments of the liberal bourgeoisie" of Vienna. When he writes that he believes the fall of colonial empires did not seem imminent in 1939, this is based on personal recollection; he and others in a school for young Communists from Britain and the colonies did not expect it at the time.

For evidence of social change in Palermo, unemployment in Sao Paulo, or the risks of introducing capitalism in China he can draw on conversations with Sicilian bandits, Brazilian labor organizers, and Chinese Communist bureaucrats (it is not for nothing that in his entry in *Who's Who* he gives as his recreation "travel"). As a fellow of King's College, Cambridge, he knew Alan Turing, the ill-fated inventor of the computer, while his Communist connections allow him to draw on the private testimony of the (Communist) mayor of Bologna concerning the favorable conditions for an emerging agro-industrial economy in the Emilia-Romagna region.[4]

There is also a disarming directness

[1]For all that he was a hero to many radical students in the Sixties, Eric Hobsbawm never conceded anything to the leftist fashions of the day. In his words, "Nobody with even minimal experience of the limitations of real life, i.e. no genuine adult, could have drafted the confident but patently absurd slogans of the Parisian May days of 1968 or the Italian 'hot autumn' of 1969." In this he is mildly reminiscent of Albert Soboul, the great French (Communist) historian of the sans-culottes. Many young French *gauchistes*, admirers of his work, assumed before encountering him that Professor Souboul must share the sartorial informality and egalitarian social style of his professional subjects. No one ever made that mistake twice.

[2]Any history of the world in our century is of necessity a history in large measure of the things Europeans (and North Americans) did to themselves and to others, and of how non-Europeans reacted to them and were (usually adversely) affected. That, after all, is what is wrong with the twentieth century, seen from a "third world" perspective, and to criticize Hobsbawm, as some reviewers have done, for understanding this and writing accordingly, seems to me incoherent.

[3]Given the advantages of such first-hand sources, and in view of the large body of available material, it does seem a pity that Hobsbawm has not drawn more on the recorded memories and experiences of other voyagers through the century.

[4]Asked by one of Europe's largest firms whether Bologna would like to be chosen as the site for a major factory, the mayor politely declined the

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and honesty about Hobsbawm's account of his personal experience of the century.[5] He includes himself among the "attentive and unquestioning multitudes" who listened to Castro rambling for hours on end; he reminds us that the "left tradition" has preferred not to acknowledge the support that fascism, once in power, could count on from formerly socialist and Communist workers; and he recounts the innocent shock of a (London-based) British Communist organizer at discovering the comparative affluence of Coventry workers: "Do you realize that up there the comrades have *cars*?"

He himself was sometimes wrong and says so, and on more than one occasion he expresses his admiration for professional journalists who saw things that he, the Marxist scholar, missed. The prophecy forty years ago, by a China correspondent for the *Times* of London, that by the twenty-first century communism would have disappeared everywhere except China, where it would have been transformed into the national ideology, shocked Hobsbawm at the time, as he admits; but today it sounds distinctly plausible. Toward the end of the book, musing on the dilemmas of our own time, he concedes that Marx, too, was wrong: mankind does *not* always "set itself only such problems as it can solve."

If the virtues of this book derive from its engaged and personal quality, so do its defects—or rather its defect, for there is really only one, though it takes many forms. Because this is a story of Hobsbawm's own lifetime—a lifetime devoted since youth, as he recently reminded us on BBC Radio, to a single cause—he is understandably inclined to see the main outlines and conflicts of the era much as he saw them when they were unfolding. In particular, the categories right/left, fascist/Communist, progressive and reactionary seem to be very firmly set, and pretty much as they first presented themselves to Hobsbawm in the Thirties. Thus he readily acknowledges the tragic errors of Communist strategy, or the curiously similar public aesthetic preferences of fascist and Communist leaders, and even the sheer awfulness of communism as a system. But it does not for a moment occur to him to reconsider the conventional polarities of the time and treat fascism and communism as more than just occasional and paradoxical allies.

This seems to me a missed opportunity. For Hobsbawm, the Spanish Civil War and the alliances and allegiances it helped shape remain "the only political cause which, even in retrospect, appears as pure and appealing as it did in 1936." But for just that reason the Spanish Civil War, and more generally the circumstantial divisions of the Thirties, are now an obstacle to a radical rethinking of the illusions to which they gave rise.

Thus Hobsbawm not only does not discuss the use to which the Spanish conflict was put by Stalin, who settled local and international scores under the guise of supporting an anti-fascist war; he also neglects to consider the way in which the whole experience of "anti-fascist unity" helped forge a new image for international communism following the military, economic, and strategic disasters of its first two decades. If we are to understand the twentieth century this radical refashioning of communism (which was repeated in a minor key after 1943) needs to be appreciated. Instead the pattern of Communist thought and practice is described here much as it was understood and presented at the time, even down to the language and categories used, so that the phenomenon of Bolshevism is accorded no critical analytical attention except on its own restricted terms.

Hobsbawm is thus quite explicit in treating the Bolshevik revolution and the subsequent Communist regime as "a programme for transforming backward countries into advanced ones," a line of reasoning that was once widespread among "revisionists" and other sympathetic critics of the left in their attempts to explain the way Lenin's revolution had become Stalin's autocracy. But he does not consider whether it was not also and above all the first and greatest of the "third world" coups d'état that he describes so well elsewhere, in which revolutionary modernizers capture the capital city and forcibly seize power in an archaic society. The distinction may seem minor, but it is crucial. By excluding the Bolshevik revolution from the category of mere "coups" and by insisting throughout that it was a revolution made possible by the "masses," Hobsbawm preserves the sui generis quality of the Communist experience, and thereby cleaves to an interpretation of our century which seems increasingly inadequate now that that experience is behind us.

In a similar way, Hobsbawm's treatment of fascism misses the chance to consider the extent to which Hitler's war amounted, de facto, to a major European revolution, transforming Central and Eastern Europe and preparing the way for the "socialist" regimes of the postwar years which built upon the radical change Hitler had brought about—notably the destruction of the intelligentsia and urban middle class of the region, first through the murder of the Jews and then as a result of the postwar expulsion of Germans from the liberated Slav lands. Because he is concerned to play down any "revolutionary" qualities in fascism, Hobsbawm's treatment of World War II is thus uncharacteristically conventional, neglecting the irony inherent in the process whereby Hitler prepared the way for Stalin. This, too, seems to me a consequence of continuing to see the world the way it seemed at the time, when both ideologically and militarily fascism and communism were in total conflict, and Stalin represented the "left wing" of the victorious forces of the Enlightenment.

The results of this approach are most obvious, however, in Hobsbawm's treatment of Eastern Europe—or rather his nontreatment of it; "real socialism" in the lands between Germany and Russia merits just six pages in a book nearly six hundred pages long, with the infamous show trials of the Fifties accorded less than a paragraph. In his mildly revisionist account of the origins of the cold war Hobsbawm suggests that it was only after the Americans had pressured Communists out of office in France and Italy (in May 1947), and threatened intervention if the 1948 election in Italy went the "wrong" way, that "the USSR followed suit by eliminating the non-communists from their multi-party 'people's democracies' which were henceforth re-classified as 'dictatorships of the proletariat.'" Until then, in his words, "where Moscow controlled its client regimes and communist movements, these were specifically committed to *not* building states on the model of the USSR, but mixed economies under multi-party parliamentary democracies..."

Eric Hobsbawm

The precise allocation of responsibility for the cold war may be a subject for debate, but the timing and purpose of the Communist strategy *within* Eastern Europe is surely unambiguous. Whatever Stalin and his followers had in mind in 1945 for the "friendly" regimes of the region, it was certainly not "multi-party democracies" in any intelligible sense of the word. The construction of "geographically-contiguous replica regimes" (as the political scientist Kenneth Jowitt put it) was under way well before the Italian elections of April 1948. The most obvious instances are Romania (where Andrei Vyshinsky arrived in February 1945 to dictate who could and who could not join the "coalition" government) and Bulgaria (where Nikola Petkov, leader of the Agrarian Party, was arrested in June 1947 and executed three months later following a disgraceful show trial).

In Czechoslovakia and Hungary the situation was more confused, at least until 1947, although in the Hungarian case Communist intimidation of the popular Smallholder Party forced its representatives to withdraw from the Parliament in 1946. Even in Czechoslovakia, where the local Communists had strong popular support and had obtained 38 percent of the votes cast in the 1946 elections, their electoral backing was falling away sharply during 1947. In response the Communists used their influence in the police and in the interior ministry to slander and discredit their opponents (notably the Slovak Democratic and Czech National Socialist parties) and, in February 1948—two months before the Italian elections of that year—they took power in a political coup.[6]

In Poland there were no illusions about a "multi-party democracy." In the postwar cabinet of 1945 fourteen of the twenty-two members had been in the Communists' Committee of National Liberation (the "Lublin" Committee) designated in July 1944 by the Soviet forces to administer liberated Poland. The results of a referendum of July 1946, following a violent campaign in which the government harrassed and intimidated non-Communist activists, were cynically rigged, as were the January 1947 general elections: Peasant Party spokesmen were kept off the radio and their supporters arrested by the thousands; their electoral lists were disqualified and accusations of espionage were made in Parliament and elsewhere to discredit their leadership. Even so, the ballot boxes had to be stuffed to prevent a Communist defeat. The result provoked international protest, to no avail. In October 1947 Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, the Peasant Party chief, fled abroad in fear for his life. Here as elsewhere these tactics had resulted by early 1949 in what was effectively a one-party state, with non-Communist parties licensed only as allies or obedient vassals, their leaders in exile, in prison, or

opportunity. As he explained to Hobsbawm, the mixed economy of his region was doing nicely, and did not need to introduce into its midst the industrial problems of major cities like Milan or Turin.

[5]Though with no reference to his own professional trajectory, where he paid a significant price for his political affiliation, at least in the early years.

[6]In the memoirs of former Hungarian and Czech Communists as well as their opponents it is clear that from the moment the Germans were ousted the local Communists intended to defeat and discredit their domestic political enemies: by falsifying ballots, by political and legal intimidation, by the exploitation of their Soviet protection. That they could also count on a real, albeit rapidly diminishing, fund of popular support should not obscure this. See, e.g., Eugen Loebl, *My Mind on Trial* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Béla Szász, *Volunteers for the Gallows: Anatomy of a Show-Trial* (Norton, 1971); Josephine Langer, *Une Saison à Bratislava* (Paris: Seuil, 1979); Stephen Kertesz, *Between Russia and the West: Hungary and the Illusions of Peacemaking 1945–1947* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1986). The Czech National Socialists had no relation to the German variety, except to the extent that both could indirectly trace their origins to ethnic divisions within the labor movement in late-nineteenth-century Bohemia.

dead. To suggest that this process was instituted only as a direct consequence of American intervention in the domestic affairs of its Western partners, and not until then, is simply wrong.

That so meticulous a historian as Eric Hobsbawm should make such an odd mistake cannot, as he might say, be an accident. The difficulty seems to be that, like Marx, he is not much interested in these little nations. To refer to the years 1950–1974 as a "Golden Age" cannot help but sound ironic to someone from, say, Prague. And it takes a degree of uncharacteristic insouciance to write thus: "What happened to Warsaw in 1944 was the penalty of premature city risings: they have only one shot in their magazine, though a big one." As a proposition about urban revolt it is of course broadly true, but as an account of what happened in Poland when the Red Army waited for the Nazis to destroy the Polish Resistance before crossing the Vistula it is historically disingenuous, to say the least.

But like another famous British historian of the left, Hobsbawm seems to find something mildly annoying about "the lands between."[7] How else shall we account for his justification of the Bolshevik model as the only alternative in 1917 to "the disintegration which was the fate of the other archaic and defeated empires, namely Austria-Hungary and Turkey. Unlike these, the Bolshevik Revolution preserved most of the multinational territorial unity of the old Tsarist state at least for another seventy-four years." That this is no casual remark is made clear later in his book when he describes the disintegration of the USSR as leaving an "international void between Trieste and Vladivostok" for the first time since the mid-eighteenth century.

For residents of that "void," the history of the twentieth century looks rather different. But then they are perforce "nationalists," and nationalism (like religion) is a rather neglected subject in this book. Even from a purely analytical point of view this seems a mistake; whatever one thinks of national sentiment (and Hobsbawm accords it very little sympathy, here as in his other works), its place in the history of our time surely merits more than dismissive remarks about the "collective egoism" of Slovenes, Croats, Czechs, and their ilk. National self-determination may be a silly and "emotional" reaction to problems which it cannot address, as Hobsbawm puts it; but to say this is to risk missing something fundamental about our times. Without a fuller understanding of faiths of all sorts—secular and religious alike—the historian of the twentieth century is placed under a serious and self-imposed handicap.[8]

The problem of faith brings us back to the Thirties, and Hobsbawm's own relationship to his material. While he labors under no illusions about the former Soviet Union, he is reluctant to concede that it had no redeeming features (including that of maintaining or imposing stability upon the map of Europe). He thus insists that it had at least the virtue of bequeathing the idea of economic planning to the West, thereby ironically saving capitalism by simultaneously threatening its existence and furnishing it with the means for its survival. But it was not *Gosplan* that lay behind the enthusiasm for planning among young radicals of the Thirties and that culminated in the mixed economies of postwar Western Europe.[9] What Hobsbawm neglects to note is that many of the postwar planners got their ideas not from Moscow but from Rome (or, in the French case, Vichy): it was often fascist, not Communist planning which appealed to the technocrats who took over in the Forties. Admiration for Soviet Five Year Plans, on the other hand, was most widespread among intellectuals—the Fabians, André Gide, and others, including left-wing students of Hobsbawm's own generation. Here, too, the history of our times falls too easily victim to private memory.

The desire to find at least some residual meaning in the whole Communist experience seems, finally, to lie behind a rather flat quality to Hobsbawm's account of the Stalinist terror. In his summary of the case for breakneck industrialization he draws upon the analogy with a war economy:

> As in a war economy . . . targets for production can, and indeed often must, be set without considering cost and cost-effectiveness, the test being whether they can be met and when. As in all such life-or-death efforts, the most effective method of fulfilling targets and meeting deadlines is giving urgent orders which produce all-out rushes.

To which one might reply that there wasn't a war on and anyway the "life" at stake was that of the Bolshevik regime, while the "death" was that of millions of human beings. On the subject of these human losses Hobsbawm rightly says that there can be "no justification"; but one longs for a fuller and more historically and humanly sensitive description of the whole tragedy. Here, by contrast, is Hobsbawm's own trenchant comment on optimistic and well-meaning nineteenth-century apologies for the New

[7]Writing in 1941, G.D.H. Cole thought that indefensible sovereign states in Eastern Europe had no future and that it would be better if a victorious postwar Soviet Union simply absorbed Poland, Hungary, and the Balkans. G.D.H. Cole, *Europe, Russia and the Future*, quoted in Serban Voinea, "Satéllisation et libération," *Revue socialiste* (March 1957), p. 226.

[8]Among secular faiths should be included the ideological myths that have moved intellectuals in our century, without which many of the worst features of the "descent into barbarism" cannot be properly explained. On these Hobsbawm has curiously little to say.

[9]Nor were these as universally "planned" as Hobsbawm sometimes implies. There were many variations on the planning theme after 1945, ranging from nationalization without planning (in Great Britain) to selective planning with some nationalization (France) to coordinated economic strategy with neither formal planning nor nationalization (West Germany). Although he gives Maynard Keynes due credit for having undermined the plausibility of non-interventionary laissez-faire economic theory, the relationship between Keynesian economics, wartime social planning, and postwar economic practice is not much discussed in this book.

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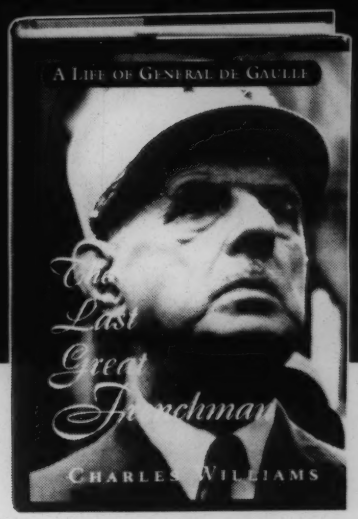

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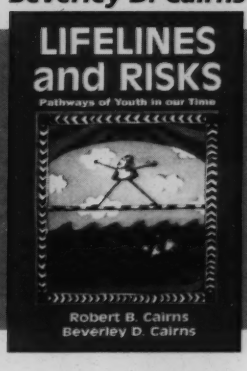

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> I daresay the Poor Law reformers honestly believed that paupers were morally improved by the separation of wives and husbands in the workhouse;... So far as the victims of these views were concerned, the results were as bad as—perhaps worse than—if they had been achieved by deliberate cruelty: inhuman, impersonal, callous degradation of the spirit of men and women and the destruction of their dignity. Perhaps this was historically inevitable and even necessary. But the victim suffered—suffering is not a privilege of well-informed persons. And any historian who cannot appreciate this is not worth reading.[10]

The fact that the Soviet Union purported to stand for a good cause, indeed the only worthwhile cause, is what mitigated its crimes for many in Hobsbawm's generation. Others might say it just made them worse.[11] In his powerful image of our century as a time of crime and folly. What seems to be missing is more first-hand description, to offset the distancing impact of large-scale analyses.

any case, the end of communism was a source of much happiness for many millions of people, even if that happiness has been diluted by the difficulties that followed, and it rather calls into question Eric Hobsbawm's conclusion that "the old century has not ended well." One is tempted, after all, to ask, "For whom?" The somber,

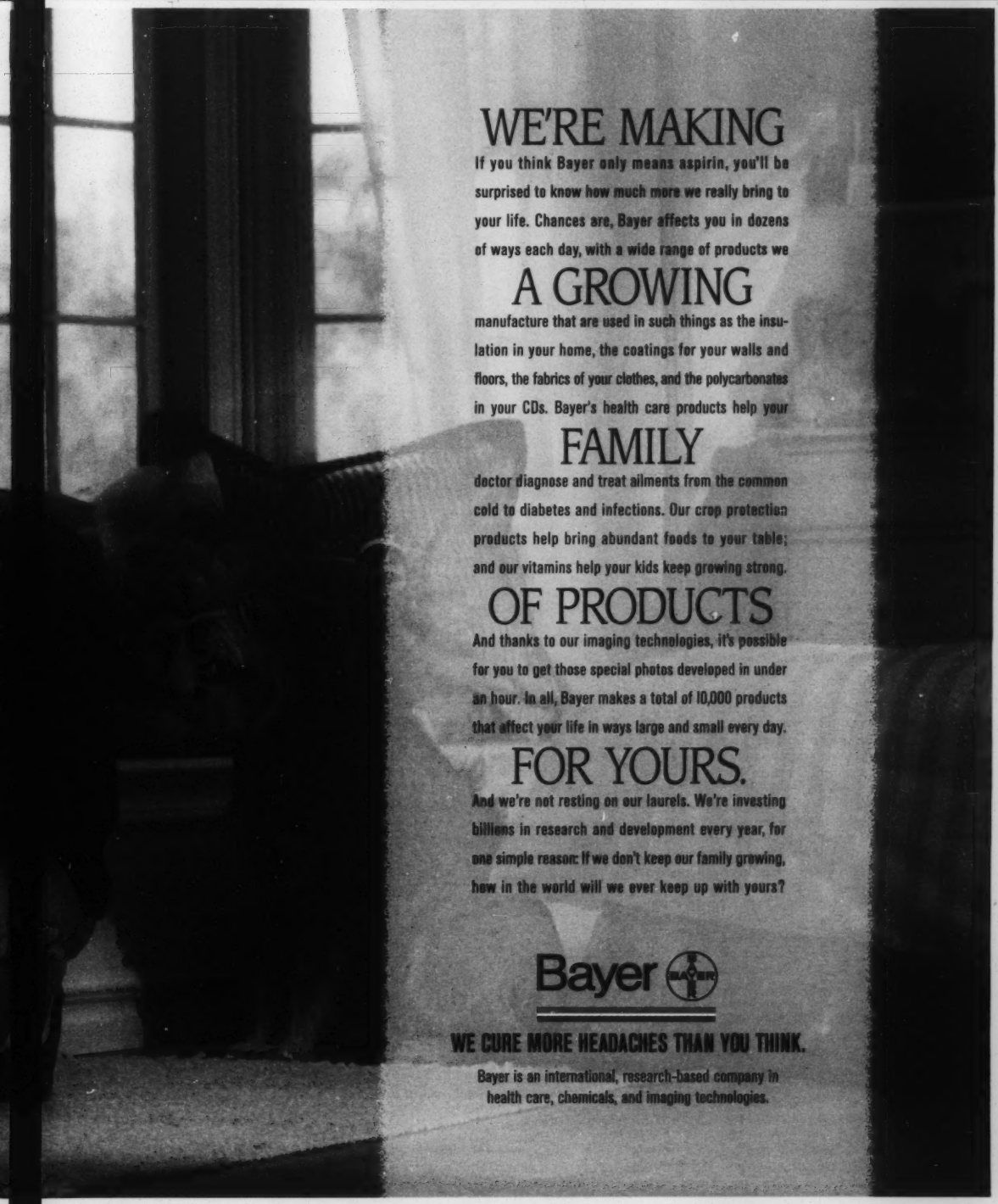
[10] E. J. Hobsbawm, "History and the 'Dark Satanic Mills,'" in *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (Basic Books, 1964), p. 118. The same cool interpretive distance is maintained in Hobsbawm's treatment of fascist terror, too, and contrasts with

[11] Contrast the reflections of the Polish writer Alexander Wat: "The loss of freedom, tyranny, abuse, hunger would all have been easier to bear if not for the compulsion to call them freedom, justice, the good of the people." Alexander Wat, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual* (University of California Press, 1990), p. 173.

almost apocalyptic tone of the final section of the book obscures the fact that the Eighties were also a decade of liberation for many, and not only in Eastern Europe. It is certainly true, as Hobsbawm says on more than one occasion, that no one any longer seems to have any solutions to offer to the world's problems, that we are tapping our way through a global fog, that we live in a world where "the past... has lost its role, in which the old maps and charts which guided human beings... no longer represent the landscape through which we move." But it is not self-evident that confident large-scale solutions of the sort we have lost were ever such a good thing—on balance they did a lot more harm than good.

In 1968 I was a member of an attentive and admiring student audience whom Eric Hobsbawm was addressing on the theme, as I recall, of the limits of student radicalism. I remember very well his conclusion, since it ran so counter to the mood of the hour. Sometimes, he reminded us, the point is not to change the world but to interpret it. But in order to interpret the world one has also to have a certain empathy with the ways in which it has changed. His latest book is a challenging, often brilliant, and always cool and intelligent account of the world we have now inherited. If it is not up to his very best work it should be recalled just how demanding a standard he has set.

But there are one or two crucial changes that have taken place in the world—the death of communism, for instance, or the related loss of faith in History and the therapeutic functions of the state about which the author is not always well pleased. That is a pity, since it shapes and sometimes misshapes his account in ways that may lessen its impact upon those who most need to read and learn from it. And I missed, in his version of the twentieth century, the ruthlessly questioning eye which has made him so indispensable a guide to the nineteenth. In a striking *apologia pro vita sua*, Eric Hobsbawm reminds us that historians are "the professional remembrancers of what their fellow-citizens wish to forget." It is a demanding and unforgiving injunction. □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Jeremy Bernstein

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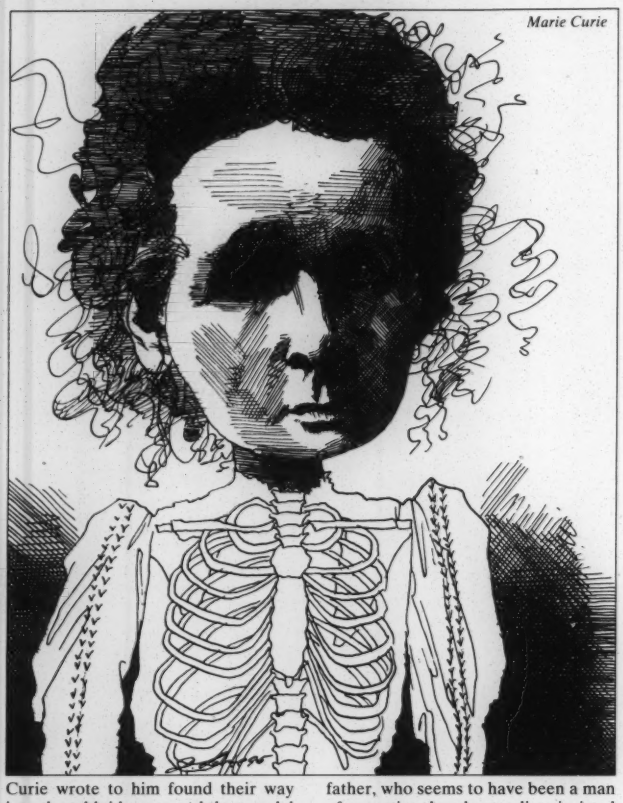
1.

In the spring of 1913 Albert Einstein came to Paris for a series of lectures, accompanied by his wife. They spent an evening with Madame Curie, and the two families made a plan to spend time together in the Swiss Alps. They did so that summer in the Engadine, not far from Zurich, where Einstein was then teaching. The group consisted of Einstein, one of his sons, and Madame Curie and her two daughters, Eve and Irène, as well as a governess for the younger daughter, Eve. Soon after, Einstein wrote a letter to his cousin Elsa Löwenthal describing what happened. Here is a brief quotation from it.

> Madame Curie is very intelligent, but has the soul of a herring [*Häringseele* in the German original], meaning that she is lacking in all feelings of joy and sorrow. Almost the only way in which she expresses her feeling is to rail at things she doesn't like. And she has a daughter [Irène] who is even worse—like a Grenadier [an infantryman]. The daughter is also very gifted...

At the time that Einstein wrote this, Madame Curie was probably a much better-known scientist than he was. She had won two Nobel Prizes—the first, in physics, in 1903 jointly with her husband, Pierre, and the French physicist Henri Becquerel for their discovery of radioactivity, and the second, in chemistry, by herself for her discovery of the elements that she named radium and polonium. She was soon to become a modern heroine: she had made her way from Poland to Paris to become one of the very few women in all of Europe to study for an advanced degree in the sciences; and she had then heroically triumphed over every obstacle, bringing—at least this is how it was viewed at the time—the healing powers of radioactivity to the world, and eventually dying from the prolonged effects of her own discovery. Every account of her life talked of her "profound modesty," her "purity of will" and "tireless devotion to work." In short, and this seems to be what Einstein was saying, she sounded like one of the most tedious people imaginable.

A few years ago I said something about this to a French physicist I knew. After listening for a while, he interrupted to say, "Your problem, my dear Bernstein, is that you do not know the slightest thing about Madame Curie." He then proceeded to give me a brief lecture, which thoroughly shook me. I had no idea that, by the summer of 1910, and lasting for well over a year, Marie Curie, then a widow, had a love affair with the French physicist Paul Langevin that scandalized France. Langevin was married and had four young children. The intimate letters that Madame



Marie Curie

Curie wrote to him found their way into the tabloid press, and the scandal provoked at least five duels in Paris, one of which involved Langevin himself. In fact, things got so bad that members of the Swedish Academy—as we learn from Ms. Quinn's recent biography—tried to persuade her not to accept the second Nobel Prize which they had just awarded her.

Maria Salomea Sklodowska was born on November 7, 1867, in Warsaw, the youngest of five children. Wladyslaw, Maria's father, while a school official and not a scientist, had a keen interest in science which he shared with his children. The first tragedy of Marie Curie's life occurred when she was ten and her mother died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-two. Maria's early childhood, and that of the other children, alternated between moments of hope and despair as their mother tried one "cure" after another while her condition inexorably deteriorated. It is little wonder that a brother and sister of Maria became doctors and that she herself devoted much of her professional life, after radioactivity had been discovered, to finding uses of it for medical purposes.

While this was going on, Maria's father lost his job as the assistant director of a local school. In order for them to earn a living, the family home was turned into a small private boarding school, but nothing was allowed to interfere with Maria's education. It was clear to almost everybody that she was unusually gifted. When she finished high school, at the age of fifteen, her father, who seems to have been a man of exceptional understanding, insisted that she "drop out" for a year and spend time with some maternal uncles in the country. Ms. Quinn describes it as a year of "an unending round of all-night dances and general hilarity." It was the only year in Marie Curie's life that could even remotely be described that way.

When she returned to Warsaw, it seemed out of the question for Maria to go on to a university. Since Warsaw University did not admit women, she would have to go abroad, and for this there was just no money. At first she did private tutoring and then took a job as a governess—eventually, at age eighteen, with the well-off Zorawski family. But she kept studying. Ms. Quinn quotes from a letter written at the time to her cousin:

> At the moment I am reading
> 1. Daniel's *Physics*, of which I have finished the first volume;
> 2. Spencer's *Sociology* in French;
> 3. Paul Ber's *Lessons on Anatomy and Physiology* in Russian.
>
> I read several things at a time: the consecutive study of a single subject would wear out my poor head which is already much overworked. When I feel myself quite unable to read with profit, I work out problems of algebra or trigonometry, which allow no lapses of attention and get me back into the right road.

While she was working as a governess, Maria and her older sister, Bronia, made a plan for Bronia to go to Paris to study medicine, then to send for Maria after she completed her studies. In the meanwhile Maria would help support both Bronia and their father. This is what happened, but it nearly didn't when Maria and the Zorawski's eldest son, Kazimierz, fell in love and planned to get married. When the Zorawskis heard about this, they absolutely refused to approve the match. However, Maria stayed in the employ of the Zorawskis for another fifteen months—partly to fulfill her financial obligations to her sister and, no doubt, hoping to continue her relationship with Kazimierz. There is an odd parallel between the outcome of this relationship and what eventually happened with Langevin. In both cases the men involved did not quite have the courage to make the final break with their families, and in both cases Marie Curie was left behind.

Such were Maria's feelings about Kazimierz that she almost changed her mind in 1889, when her sister wrote that she was both finishing her studies and getting married to a fellow medical student, which meant that Maria could finally come to Paris. If, at this point, she had married Kazimierz and stayed in Poland, the history of modern physics would have been quite different. As it was, she spent the next year in Warsaw looking after her father and saving money. Finally, in November 1891, she left by train—fourth class—for Paris and the Sorbonne. She was twenty-three. Her sister had wanted Maria to move in with her and her new husband. But she was put off by his gregarious manners, and for the rest of her student days she lived in "bachelor quarters" in various garrets.

Maria Sklodowska began signing her name "Marie" almost as soon as she arrived in Paris. She wanted to study science and had the good fortune to arrive at the Sorbonne at a time when it was undergoing something of a renaissance. One of her professors was Gabriel Lippmann, who would win the Nobel Prize in physics in 1908. Another was Henri Poincaré, who was arguably the greatest mathematician of his time. These people seem to have accepted her simply as a brilliant and extremely well-prepared student who happened to be a woman; her years of study by herself turned out to have had advantages.

Marie's first ambition was to return to Poland and become a science teacher—presumably in a high school, given the situation of women in the universities. But at this point—Ms. Quinn conjectures that it was through her professor Lippmann—she got a commission from something called the Society for the Encouragement of National Industry to study the magnetic properties of different kinds of steel. That kept her in Paris and led to her meeting Pierre Curie, who was eight years older than Marie.

By the time they met in April 1894, Pierre Curie was already an established physicist with his own laboratory. He had done fundamental work on the properties of crystals, and had

turned his attention to the study of the magnetic properties of various substances as a function of temperature. The results of this work are still taught—with modifications—in modern physics courses, although their explanation had to await the development of the quantum theory. If he had lived longer, he might have gotten a Nobel Prize for this work as well. In fact, the collaboration between Marie and Pierre Curie was a remarkably close one—it seems clear neither would have made their later discoveries on his or her own.

The couple was introduced by a Polish physicist named Józef Kowalski and his wife, who had met Marie earlier. They had heard about Marie's commission and the fact that she lacked adequate laboratory space to carry it out. Pierre Curie, who had space for her in his own laboratory, was himself then teaching at the Ecole municipale de physique et chimie industrielles—most definitely not one of the *grandes écoles*. In fact he was then, and for most of his life, a nonestablishment figure. He had originally been educated at home and had never bothered to take his Ph.D., although he had acquired a *licence* at the Sorbonne, after which he immediately began a program of original research collaborating with his brother. Marie was also an outsider, a foreigner in France and from not quite the right class in Poland. Marie recognized this about the two of them at once. "There was between his conceptions and mine, despite the difference between our native countries, a surprising kinship, no doubt attributable to a certain likeness in the moral atmosphere in which we were both raised." They married in July 1895 in the Town Hall in Sceaux and went on a trip to Brittany on two new bicycles purchased as a wedding present.

What happened next was linked to the early history of the discovery of radioactivity. In the fall of 1895—a few months after the Curies were married—the German physicist Wilhelm Roentgen discovered what he, and we, call X-rays. To put Roentgen's discovery in modern, and entirely anachronistic, terms, he bombarded metal plates with electrons. When these electrons collided with the atoms in the metal, the atomic electrons in the metal were elevated to what, much later, became known as "excited states"—states of higher energy. The atomic electrons then relaxed back into their lowest, or "ground state," and, to conserve energy in the process, emitted the electromagnetic radiation that Roentgen called X-rays.

Roentgen himself had no such model in mind. Indeed the existence of atoms was still being debated. He concentrated on the properties of the rays, not on how they were produced. The striking thing that Roentgen found about them was that they could readily penetrate matter. When they did so, moreover, the emitted radiation would make a visible imprint on a photographic plate, with the darkness or lightness of the image reflecting the different degrees of opacity of the body through which the X-rays passed. Late in December 1895, he succeeded in "photographing" the bones in his wife's left hand—opening a new era in medicine. He won the first Nobel Prize in physics in 1901 for this work.

The next step was taken by the French physicist Henri Becquerel. In February 1896, he made the more or less accidental discovery that the substance potassium uranyl disulfate spontaneously emitted radiation. In other words, to use Madame Curie's term, it was radioactive. This was very puzzling. It appeared as if uranium was pouring out energy at what seemed to be a constant rate—it took a few years before it was realized that the activity actually fell off with time and that the rate of this falloff, which could be very slow, was characteristic of the atom that was decaying. Where did this energy come from? Did it fill space and somehow transform itself into the radiant energy of decay? Or was the conservation of energy itself violated? Neither Becquerel nor anyone else could say, and as a good empiricist he contented himself with the facts. It was at this point that the Curies started their work together.

The idea of studying radioactivity appears to have been entirely Marie Curie's. She was familiar with Becquerel's work and with the fact that it seemed to have come to a dead end. One can imagine that it did not take much persuading to get Pierre to join the enterprise, which began on December 16, 1897, according to her laboratory notebooks. Pierre was a master builder of scientific instruments. Their idea was to measure the degree that air became "electrified" when the radiation emitted by the uranium passed through it. The degree of electrification, or "ionization" as it is technically called, would be a measure of the strength of the radioactive source. This is where Pierre's sensitive instruments for measuring electric charge came in. The first question that had occurred to Madame Curie was whether this spontaneous radioactivity was a property of uranium alone, or whether there were other radioactive elements. It was here that the Curies made their first great discovery.

By the winter of 1898, Marie had tested a variety of elements for radioactivity. She found no conclusive evidence that any were emitting radiation, apart from the uranium. This is not surprising. She had been testing relatively light elements, like gold and copper. These do have unstable types—"isotopes"—but when these elements are found in nature, the unstable isotopes have largely decayed and what one is mostly left with is the stable isotope, which is not radioactive. But heavy elements like uranium do not have stable isotopes. In fact, they would have already decayed into lighter elements if they didn't decay so slowly. It can take over a billion years for half of any sample to decay, and that is why they are still around and still decaying. This was certainly not understood when the Curies were doing this work. On the contrary, it was their discovery that started the process toward this understanding.

Then on February 17, 1898, Marie had what turned out to be the inspired idea of testing pitchblende—the heavy black material out of which uranium had first been extracted. They tested it for radioactivity and discovered, to their astonishment, that it was more active than uranium itself. What could that mean? At this point the Curies

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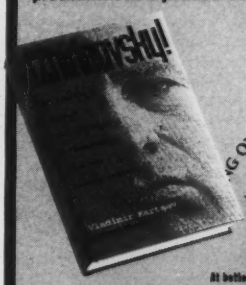

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made an assumption that brought something entirely new into physics and that we have applied ever since. Since pitchblende, which was a very messy compound consisting of several elements, was more active than uranium, it must contain an unknown element that was emitting this radiation. From that time to this, we have used the products of radioactivity—the particles emitted—to identify what has produced it. In fact, many of the particles we now deal with are so unstable—they disappear so rapidly—that they can *only* be identified through what they emit.

With the help of a chemist, Gustave Bémont, the Curies attempted to isolate the unknown element. Finally, by July, after processing tons of material in vats, they were ready to announce their findings; they wrote in a scientific journal that "if the existence of the metal is confirmed, we propose to call it *polonium* after the name of the country of origin of one of us." By the end of the year they were able to announce the discovery of a second new radioactive element, which they named radium. They spent the next several years painstakingly measuring its properties, their research culminating in a 1903 paper by Pierre Curie and a collaborator, Albert Laborde, in which they measured how much energy a gram of radium can release in an hour—enough to boil water.

Probably Ms. Quinn would not agree, but to me this was the high point of their research. It was left to the great New Zealand–born experimental physicist Ernest Rutherford and his young collaborators to take the next steps in understanding radioactivity. I have recently reread the early papers of the Curies and also the 1902 paper of Rutherford and Frederick Soddy entitled "The Cause and Nature of Radioactivity." Reading this 1902 paper is like stepping into a new world—the world of modern physics. To understand why, we must recall that at the turn of the twentieth century there was a debate about the role of the atom. Did matter really consist, as Newton put it, of "solid, massy, hard, impenetrable movable Particles...so very hard, as never to wear or break in pieces"?[1] This is what one would call the "physicists' atom." It has a mass, a shape, an electric charge, and so on.

The implicit assumption was that if one could actually divide and redivide matter indefinitely, one would ultimately arrive at this ineluctable component. On the other hand, there was the "chemists' atom," what Einstein referred to more as a "visualizing symbol than as knowledge concerning the factual construction of matter."[2] In other words, one could use the atom as a model for chemical reactions based on the assumption that these reactions took place *as if* matter was composed of atoms, without committing oneself to the reality or inner structures of these building blocks.

No one had any difficulty with this use of the atomic hypothesis. But there was a vivid debate among scientists at this time about the actual existence of the physicists' atom. The most important skeptical voice was that of the philosopher-physicist Ernst Mach, who used to ask the question "*Haben Sie einen gesehen?*"—"Have you seen one?"[3] As far as one can tell, the Curies were firmly committed to the physicists' atom, and they could never fully accept the idea that this atom was unstable. One can well understand their reluctance. As their own research showed, radioactivity proceeds irrespective of the state of the radioactive matter. You can heat uranium, dissolve it, or paint it blue, and it will still continue to emit radiation at the same rate. The process appears to be without a discernible cause, indeed spontaneous. This was on the face of it quite different from Roentgen's X-rays, which were produced by actually bombarding a piece of metal with electrons. What was the mechanism that produced the spontaneous radiation? That was a question that could not even be correctly formulated until the invention of the quantum theory three decades later.

Then there was the question of the energy. Where did it come from? At one point Madame Curie conjectured that a radiating element might lose mass as it radiates. In this she was quite right, but that is quite different from the idea that an individual atom—a building block—might lose mass as it decays, an idea the Curies, committed to the physicists' atom, had enormous difficulty accepting. But this is just what happens. The lost atomic mass of the products that are decaying is converted into energy according to Einstein's formula $E=mc^2$. However, this insight had to await Einstein's theory of relativity. Indeed, in the short paper in which he introduced this formula, in 1905, he wrote, "It is not impossible that with bodies whose energy-content is variable to a high degree (e.g., with radium salts) the theory may be put to the test."[4]

Despite these problems, Rutherford in 1902 had no doubt whatever that radioactivity was an atomic phenomenon. His paper with Soddy has a concluding section that contains the following sentence:

> Since, therefore, radioactivity is at once an atomic phenomenon and accompanied by chemical changes in which new types of matter are produced, these changes must be occurring within the atom, and the radioactive elements must be undergoing spontaneous transformation.

He did not suggest a mechanism by which this happened, nor was he overly concerned about the relation of lost mass to energy. His intuition told him what must be going on, and he was content to wait for the theorists to catch up. This gave him an enormous advantage over the Curies. For the next few years, while Pierre was alive, they spent much of their time trying unsuccessfully to avoid a real atomic description of radioactivity—something that Madame Curie continued to avoid even after Pierre's death, in 1906. Rutherford had no such burden, and he and his colleagues and students made one fundamental discovery after another.

Madame Curie and her daughter Irène in 1925

The death of Pierre Curie, on April 19, 1906, was a blow from which Marie never really recovered. Not only did their two young daughters—Irène, who had been born in 1897, and Eve, who was born in 1904—suddenly lose their father, but Marie lost her most intimate scientific collaborator and her ally in challenging the conventional values of the scientific establishment. In 1903, when Pierre was proposed for the Legion of Honor, he refused to allow his name to be put into nomination. When they won the Nobel Prize that same year—Marie being the first woman to have won it and the last in the sciences to do so until 1935, when her daughter Irène shared the prize in chemistry with her husband—they didn't even attend the ceremonies. Marie was not well and Pierre decided that he couldn't miss his classes—a position we cannot imagine any university scientist taking today. However, by the time of Pierre's death the Curies were moving into the establishment. They had won several prizes in addition to the Nobel, and Pierre, with great reluctance, had allowed himself to be elected to the French Academy of Sciences.

By 1906, as Ms. Quinn suggests, Pierre Curie was beginning to show signs of radiation sickness. He had debilitating pains in his back and legs and his hands were so damaged by radiation burns that he apparently had trouble dressing himself. No one knew then just how dangerous and insidious exposure to radioactivity was. No present-day scientist would spend ten minutes in a laboratory as contaminated as that of the Curies, let alone years at a time, and it is astonishing they weren't both killed. In fact, however, Pierre was run over by a horse-drawn wagon filled with cloth for military uniforms. His skull was crushed under one of the wheels, and he was killed instantly. He had been returning from a meeting and had, it appears, absent-mindedly stepped into the street. If, as Ms. Quinn speculates, he had been in better health and more agile, he might have gotten out of the way.

Marie Curie was told soon afterward. In her journal for that day, she writes,

> I enter the room. Someone says: "He is dead." Can one comprehend such words? Pierre is dead, he who I had seen leave looking fine this morning, he who I expected to press in my arms this evening. I will only see him dead and it's over forever. I repeat your name again and always "Pierre, Pierre, my Pierre," alas that doesn't make him come back, he is gone forever, leaving me nothing but desolation and despair.

Publicly, she hardly ever mentioned his name again; but privately, she addressed him in her diary as if he were still alive. "Did you say it then? I don't remember how many times have you said to me, my Pierre: 'we really have the same way of seeing everything.'" In photographs from this period, she has a fierce, embattled look; one would not suspect that she is about to enter into a romantic relationship with Paul Langevin that would create a scandal in Paris.

[1]This quotation is taken from Newton's *Opticks*. The relevant passage can be found in the anthology *The World of the Atom*, edited by Henry A. Boorse and Lloyd Motz (Basic Books, 1966), p. 102. Excerpts from the papers of the Curies and Rutherford can also be found in this collection.

[2]See *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*, edited by P. A. Schilpp (Library of Living Philosophers, 1949), p. 19.

[3]See my book *Cranks, Quarks, and the Cosmos* (Basic Books, 1993) for a fuller discussion, especially the chapter entitled "Ernst Mach and the Quarks."

[4]See, for example, A. Pais, *Subtle is the Lord* (Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 148.

Paul Langevin was born in Paris in 1872, making him five years younger than Marie Curie. Unlike Pierre Curie, he went to all the right schools and did brilliantly. It seems he first encountered Pierre Curie when he was seventeen and came to study under him at the Ecole municipale de physique et chimie. Afterward he went to the Sorbonne and then placed first in the entrance examination for the Ecole normale. By 1902 Langevin had a joint appointment at the Collège de France and at the Ecole municipale, where he replaced Pierre Curie when the latter went to the Sorbonne in 1904. After Pierre died, Marie took over his post at the Sorbonne and Langevin took over hers at the Ecole supérieure normale in Sèvres. Langevin was by all accounts a marvelous teacher. He did not publish often, but he had the respect of physicists like Einstein, who claimed that Langevin would have discovered the theory of relativity if Einstein had not.

Ms. Quinn leaves out half of Langevin's life. He lived until 1946, long enough to see his daughter Hélène, who was born in 1909, just before his affair with Marie Curie, return from Auschwitz. Yet Ms. Quinn dismisses him long before this, writing:

> By 1914, according to his son André, Paul and Jeanne [his wife] were back together. Later on, with his wife's acquiescence, Langevin had another mistress. But this time he chose a woman of the acceptable kind: she was an anonymous secretary.

For Quinn, Marie Curie was the victim and Langevin the aggressor. My own impression is that Marie Curie knew what she wanted, and what she wanted was Langevin. The problem was that Langevin had been married since 1898 and was the father of four children.

Langevin must have been one of the few people—certainly one of the few men—with whom Marie Curie could share her feelings about the loss of Pierre. His own marriage had been a very stormy one, and he talked of divorce while continuing to have children. In the summer of 1910, Marie Curie wrote him from her vacation by the seashore,

> My dear Paul, I spent yesterday evening and night thinking of you, of the hours that we have spent together and of which I have kept a delicious memory. I still see your good and tender eyes, your charming smile, and I think only of the moment when I will find again all the sweetness of your presence.

That was the summer when the two became lovers. They rented an apartment together near the Sorbonne where they could be alone. What Ms. Quinn does not tell us—perhaps no one knows—is who wanted to make this arrangement. Who paid the rent? Langevin was a relatively unknown academic with a wife and four children to support. Would he have had the money to rent a spare Parisian apartment? Madame Curie, for her part, was by this time a world-renowned scientist, the well-paid administrator of a very large laboratory. Who was "keeping" whom? Langevin's wife realized very quickly that her husband's relationship with Madame Curie had now turned into something else. She was determined to break up this happy liaison by all means, fair or foul. It was, ironically, Marie Curie herself who supplied her with the necessary ammunition.

The lovers, even though they were sharing an apartment, continued to exchange letters, which they kept in a drawer. In the spring of 1911, someone, apparently hired by Madame Langevin, broke into the apartment and stole them. The most damaging one was written by Marie in September of 1910.

> There are very deep affinities between us which only need a favorable life situation to develop. We had some presentiment of it in the past, but it didn't come into full consciousness until we found ourselves face to face, me in mourning for the beautiful life that I had made for myself and which collapsed in such a disaster, you with your feeling that, in spite of your good will and your efforts, you had completely missed out on this family life which you had wished to be so rich in abundant joy....

Then she turned to the subject of Langevin's wife.

> Your wife is incapable of remaining tranquil and allowing you your freedom; she will try always to exercise a constraint over you for all sorts of reasons: material interests, desire to distract herself and even simple idleness...
>
> Madame Langevin was at this time taking care of a child who had been born a year earlier, as well as three other children. Marie has something to say about this as well.
>
> If the separation took place, your wife would very quickly stop paying attention to her children, who she is incapable of guiding and who bore her, and you could take up little by little the preponderant direction.

Marie now gave Langevin detailed advice on what to do.

> It is certain that your wife will not readily accept a separation, because she has no interest in it; she has always lived by exploiting you and will not find that situation advantageous. What's more, it is in her character to stay, when she thinks you would like her to go. It is therefore necessary for you to decide, no matter how difficult that is for you, to do all that you can, methodically, to make her life insupportable... the first time she proposes that she could allow you to separate while keeping the children, *you must accept without hesitation* [the italics are in Ms. Quinn's translation and presumably in the original] to cut short the blackmail she will attempt on this subject. It's enough now that Jean [Langevin's oldest child, who was then eleven] continues to board at the lycée and that you live in Paris at the School; you

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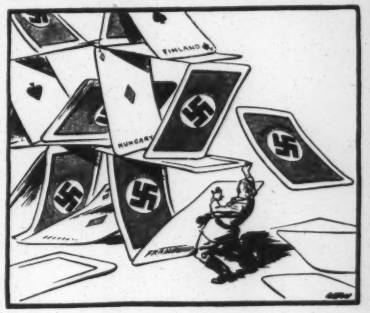

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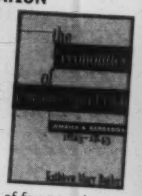

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could go to see your other children at Fontenay or have them brought to the Perrins' [This is a reference to the physicist Jean Perrin and his wife. Langevin had done some of his earliest research with Perrin]; the change wouldn't be so big as you think and *it certainly would be better for everyone*. We could maintain the same precautions we do now for seeing each other until the situation becomes stable... [emphasis added]

Before Madame Langevin made these and other letters public, there were rumors about the affair and, as usually happens, people chose sides. Einstein remarked that Madame Curie "was not attractive enough to become dangerous for anyone." In the meanwhile, Langevin moved back in with his wife. Perhaps things would have calmed down, except that both Langevin and Madame Curie were invited to the Solvay Conference in Brussels in 1911 and planned to go. This was too much for Madame Langevin, and she decided to make the letters public.

There then entered one of those figures who suddenly cause a scandal and then vanish into obscurity. Gustave Téry was a journalist who had been active on most sides of most questions—all with equal vigor. In his younger years he had lampooned the Catholic Church and had taken Dreyfus's part in the famous affair. By 1909, he had founded a newspaper named *l'Oeuvre* and had taken a sharp turn to the right. He was now a chauvinist and an anti-Semite who referred in articles to the "German-Jewish Sorbonne." He saw in Madame Curie's affair another way of attacking the Sorbonne. Téry published selections from the letters, including the long one from Marie outlining her plan. He commented incessantly on the affair in his newspaper, noting, for example, that Langevin was being referred to as the "*chopin de la Polonaise*"—"Chopin" then being a French slang word for a "patsy."

To add to everything else, the Swedish Academy at this very time had voted to confer on Madame Curie a second Nobel Prize. The day before the letters were published, Madame Curie wrote to Svante Arrhenius, a member of the Swedish Academy, who had been one of her strongest supporters, to inquire whether in view of all the rumors circulating about her personal life, it would be better if she stayed away from the ceremony. Arrhenius assured her, by letter, that all would be well and that she could come. Six days later he changed his mind. The letters by then had been published, and Langevin had challenged Téry to a duel. Téry had named him explicitly in his newspaper and had called him a "boor and a coward"—dueling words. Pistols were chosen, but after the two men had lined up, Téry pointed his pistol to the ground, indicating that he had no intention of firing. Langevin then did the same and the matter was settled when the seconds took the pistols and fired them into the air. Later, in his newspaper, Téry wrote, "I obviously had scruples about depriving French science of a precious brain..." He, too, now disappears from Ms. Quinn's narrative.

Arrhenius then wrote to Madame Curie informing her that if the Academy had known the facts outlined in her now published letter, they would not have awarded her the prize. Much to her credit, she stood her ground, replying to Arrhenius that "in fact the prize has been awarded for the discovery of Radium and Polonium. I believe that there is no connection between my scientific work and the facts of private life.... I cannot accept the idea in principle that the appreciation of the value of scientific work should be influenced by libel and slander concerning private life." She attended the award ceremonies in Stockholm.

One of the consequences of Langevin's duel and the publicity surrounding it was that he and his wife arranged a legal separation, with her getting custody of the children. Marie Curie wanted him to seek a divorce, but Langevin refused, saying that he would not take "sides publicly against the mother of his children." This, it seems, ended their affair.

It took many years before Madame Curie's reputation was restored in France, and it might have taken longer had it not been for her work during the First World War. She installed portable X-ray machines in a fleet of eighteen vehicles, and tens of thousands of wounded soldiers were examined as a result. She trained the medical workers and when necessary drove to the battlefront to help repair the machines.

When her daughter Irène was eighteen, she also began to teach radiology, initiating a collaboration between the two women that continued in Madame Curie's laboratory for the rest of her life.

By the time Marie Curie died in 1934, she had become a scientific icon comparable to Einstein and perhaps to Stephen Hawking in our own day. It is amazing that it took so long for the effects of radiation to kill her. She died in a sanatorium in the French Alps, after having operations for cataracts and suffering from lesions on her fingers from handling radium. The actual cause of death was pernicious anemia surely brought about by radiation exposure. But for nearly a decade before her death, the most interesting work in her laboratory was being done by others—especially by her daughter Irène and her son-in-law Frédéric Joliot.

One of the most unsatisfying things in Ms. Quinn's book is her foreshortened treatment of Joliot. He was born in 1900, and was also an outsider from a completely nonreligious family. After his father died, he had to leave the boarding school that he had been attending, for a public school. Then, in 1920, he entered the Ecole municipale de physique et chimie industrielles, the very place at which Pierre Curie had taught and of which Langevin was now the director of studies. The entry on Joliot in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* notes that it was Langevin

> who had a decisive influence on Joliot: he oriented the young man not only toward scientific research but also toward a pacifist and socially conscious humanism that eventually led him to socialism.

In 1942, it led him to join the then clandestine Communist Party.

Langevin, who seems to have remained friends with Madame Curie, learned that she had a stipend to pay an assistant at her Institut du Radium and, in 1925, Joliot took the job. There he met Irène Curie, who was also at the Institut, and they were married, in 1926. They had a daughter and a son. The daughter, Hélène, who was born in 1927, became a physicist, graduating first in her class from the very Ecole municipale that her grandfather had attended. In 1949, she married the grandson of Langevin, who was also a physicist. Hardly any of this is to be found in Ms. Quinn's book. During the greater part of the time that Joliot and his wife were at the Institut, they worked on separate projects. But there was a four-year period, beginning in 1931, when they collaborated and produced the research for which they won the Nobel Prize in 1935.

This work was really in nuclear physics. It involved the production of radioactive elements by bombarding stable ones with nuclear projectiles. This is sometimes called "artificial radioactivity," but I think the name is misleading. It is really a kind of nuclear alchemy, in which a stable nucleus absorbs some of the nuclear components of the bombarding particle and is transformed into a new isotope, which is radioactive. We now take this process for granted, forgetting that it had to be discovered by someone. During this work, they had some assistance from a young German physicist named Wolfgang Genter, who was to reappear in their life during World War II. Joliot was one of the people who discovered that, in nuclear fission, neutrons are released so that a chain reaction is possible. He made this discovery in 1939 and, unlike contemporary American scientists, published it in the open literature. It was read by German nuclear physicists and was one of the reasons they began their atomic-bomb program.

Joliot was fully aware of what his discovery meant. In fact, he tried to acquire "heavy water" from Norway and ordered six tons of uranium oxide to attempt to make a nuclear reactor. When the Germans invaded Paris, he managed to spirit away this potentially dangerous material. Soon after the capture of Paris, he was visited by some German bomb scientists. They left Gentner as a kind of liaison to their program. But Gentner was secretly a committed anti-Nazi. He made sure that nothing of value got to Germany, and he shielded Joliot, who had by now joined the Resistance. Since Joliot was a Communist, the American and British authorities kept him apart from the Allied effort to construct an atom bomb.

After the war, Joliot, although he opposed the government of General de Gaulle, was nonetheless largely responsible for creating the French nuclear-energy program. He died in 1958, two years after Irène's death. Ms. Quinn ignores most of this part of the history as well, and her book would have benefited if she had added a final chapter on what happened to the family after Madame Curie died. Still her biography is the first I know of in English to show that Marie Curie was a passionate and complex person, and not a monument. □

The Scientist as Rebel

Freeman Dyson

There is no such thing as a unique scientific vision, any more than there is a unique poetic vision. Science is a mosaic of partial and conflicting visions. But there is one common element in these visions. The common element is rebellion against the restrictions imposed by the locally prevailing culture, Western or Eastern as the case may be. The vision of science is not specifically Western. It is no more Western than it is Arab or Indian or Japanese or Chinese. Arabs and Indians and Japanese and Chinese had a big share in the development of modern science. And two thousand years earlier, the beginnings of ancient science were as much Babylonian and Egyptian as Greek. One of the central facts about science is that it pays no attention to East and West and North and South and black and yellow and white. It belongs to everybody who is willing to make the effort to learn it. And what is true of science is also true of poetry. Poetry was not invented by Westerners. India has poetry older than Homer. Poetry runs as deep in Arab and Japanese culture as it does in Russian and English. Just because I quote poems in English, it does not follow that the vision of poetry has to be Western. Poetry and science are gifts given to all of humanity.

For the great Arab mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam, science was a rebellion against the intellectual constraints of Islam, a rebellion which he expressed more directly in his incomparable verses:

And that inverted Bowl they call the Sky,
Whereunder crawling cooped we live and die,
Lift not your hands to It *for help, —for it*
As impotently rolls as you or I.

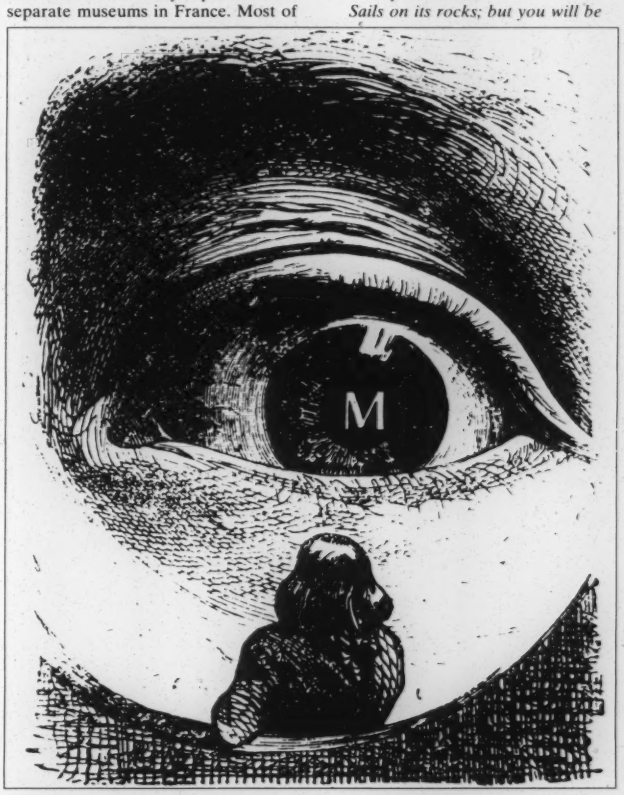
For the first generations of Japanese scientists in the nineteenth century, science was a rebellion against their traditional culture of feudalism. For the great Indian physicists of this century, Raman, Bose, and Saha, science was a double rebellion, first against English domination and second against the fatalistic ethic of Hinduism. And in the West, too, great scientists from Galileo to Einstein have been rebels. Here is how Einstein himself described the situation:

> When I was in the seventh grade at the Luitpold Gymnasium in Munich, I was summoned by my home-room teacher who expressed the wish that I leave the school. To my remark that I had done nothing amiss, he replied only, "Your mere presence spoils the respect of the class for me."

Einstein was glad to be helpful to the teacher. He followed the teacher's advice and dropped out of school at the age of fifteen.

From these and many other examples we see that science is not governed by the rules of Western philosophy or Western methodology. Science is an alliance of free spirits in all cultures rebelling against the local tyranny that each culture imposes on its children. Insofar as I am a scientist, my vision of the universe is not reductionist or anti-reductionist. I have no use for Western isms of any kind. Like Loren Eiseley, I feel myself a traveler on a journey that is far longer than the history of nations and philosophies, longer even than the history of our species.

A few years ago an exhibition of Paleolithic cave art came to the Museum of Natural History in New York. It was a wonderful opportunity to see in one place the carvings in stone and bone that are normally kept in a dozen separate museums in France. Most of



the carvings were done in France about 14,000 years ago, during a short flowering of artistic creation at the very end of the last Ice Age. The beauty and delicacy of the carving is extraordinary. The people who carved these objects cannot have been ordinary hunters amusing themselves in front of the cave fire. They must have been trained artists sustained by a high culture.

And the greatest surprise, when you see these objects for the first time, is the fact that their culture is not Western. They have no resemblance at all to the primitive art that arose ten thousand years later in Mesopotamia and Egypt and Crete. If I had not known that the old cave art was found in France, I would have guessed that it came from Japan. The style looks today more Japanese than European. That exhibition showed us vividly that over periods of 10,000 years the distinctions between Western and Eastern and African cultures lose all meaning. Over a time span of a 100,000 years we are all Africans. And over a time span of 300 million years we are all amphibians, waddling uncertainly out of dried-up ponds onto the alien and hostile land.

And with this long view of the past goes Robinson Jeffers's even longer view of the future. In the long view, not only European civilization but the human species itself is transitory. Here is the vision of Robinson Jeffers, expressed in different parts of his long poem "The Double Axe."

"Come, little ones.
You are worth no more than the foxes and yellow wolfkins, yet I will give you wisdom.
O future children:
Trouble is coming; the world as of the present time
Sails on its rocks; but you will be born and live
Afterwards. Also a day will come when the earth
Will scratch herself and smile and rub off humanity:
But you will be born before that."

"Time will come, no doubt,
When the sun too shall die; the planets will freeze, and the air on them; frozen gases, white flakes of air
Will be the dust: which no wind ever will stir: this very dust in dim starlight glistening
Is dead wind, the white corpse of wind.
Also the galaxy will die; the glitter of the Milky Way, our universe, all the stars that have names are dead.
Vast is the night. How you have grown, dear night, walking your empty halls, how tall!"

Robinson Jeffers was no scientist, but he expressed better than any other poet the scientist's vision. Ironic, detached, contemptuous like Einstein of national pride and cultural taboos, he stood in awe of nature alone. He stood alone in uncompromising opposition to the follies of the Second World War. His poems during those years of patriotic frenzy were unpublishable. "The Double Axe" was finally published in 1948, after a long dispute between Jeffers and his editors. I discovered Jeffers thirty years later, when the sadness and the passion of the war had become a distant memory. Fortunately, his works are now in print and you can read them for yourselves.

Science as subversion has a long history. There is a long list of scientists who sat in jail and of other scientists who helped get them out and incidentally saved their lives. In our century we have seen the physicist Landau sitting in jail in the Soviet Union and Kapitsa risking his own life by appealing to Stalin to let Landau out. We have seen the mathematician André Weil sitting in jail in Finland during the Winter War of 1939–1940 and Lars Ahlfors saving his life. The finest moment in the history of the Institute for Advanced Study, where I work, came in 1957, when we appointed the mathematician Chandler Davis a member of the Institute, with financial support provided by the American government through the National Science Foundation. Chandler was then a convicted felon because he refused to rat on his friends when questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee. He had been convicted of contempt of Congress for not answering questions and had appealed against his conviction to the Supreme Court.

While his case was under appeal, he came to Princeton and continued doing mathematics. That is a good example of science as subversion. After his Institute fellowship was over, he lost his appeal and sat for six months in jail. Chandler is now a distinguished professor at the University of Toronto and is actively engaged in helping people in jail to get out. Another example of science as subversion is Andrei Sakharov. Chandler Davis and Sakharov belong to an old tradition in science that goes all the way back to the rebels Franklin and Priestley in the eighteenth century, to Galileo and Giordano Bruno in the seventeenth and sixteenth. If science ceases to be a rebellion against authority, then it does not deserve the talents of our brightest children. I was lucky to be introduced to science at school as a subversive activity of the younger boys. We organized a Science Society as an act of rebellion against compulsory Latin and compulsory football. We should try to introduce our children to science today as a rebellion against poverty and ugliness and militarism and economic injustice.

The vision of science as rebellion was articulated in Cambridge with great clarity on February 4, 1923, in a lecture by the biologist J. B. S. Haldane to the Society of Heretics. The lecture was published as a little book with the title *Daedalus*. Here is Haldane's vision of the role of scientist. I have taken the liberty to abbreviate Haldane slightly and to omit the phrases that he quoted in Latin and Greek, since unfortunately I can no longer assume that the heretics of Cambridge are fluent in those languages.

The conservative has but little to

fear from the man whose reason is the servant of his passions, but let him beware of him in whom reason has become the greatest and most terrible of the passions. These are the wreckers of outworn empires and civilizations, doubters, disintegrators, deicides. In the past they have been men like Voltaire, Bentham, Thales, Marx, but I think that Darwin furnishes an example of the same relentlessness of reason in the field of science. I suspect that as it becomes clear that at present reason not only has a freer play in science than elsewhere, but can produce as great effects on the world through science as through politics, philosophy or literature, there will be more Darwins.

We must regard science, then, from three points of view. First, it is the free activity of man's divine faculties of reason and imagination. Secondly, it is the answer of the few to the demands of the many for wealth, comfort and victory, gifts which it will grant only in exchange for peace, security and stagnation. Finally it is man's gradual conquest, first of space and time, then of matter as such, then of his own body and those of other living beings, and finally the subjugation of the dark and evil elements in his own soul.

I have already made it clear that I have a low opinion of reductionism, which seems to me to be at best irrelevant and at worst misleading as a description of what science is about. Let me begin with pure mathematics. Here the failure of reductionism has been demonstrated by rigorous proof. This will be a familiar story to many of you. The great mathematician David Hilbert, after thirty years of high creative achievement on the frontiers of mathematics, walked into a blind alley of reductionism. In his later years he espoused a program of formalization, which aimed to reduce the whole of mathematics to a collection of formal statements using a finite alphabet of symbols and a finite set of axioms and rules of inference. This was reductionism in the most literal sense, reducing mathematics to a set of marks written on paper, and deliberately ignoring the context of ideas and applications that give meaning to the marks. Hilbert then proposed to solve the problems of mathematics by finding a general process that could decide, given any formal statement composed of mathematical symbols, whether that statement was true or false. He called the problem of finding this decision process the *Entscheidungsproblem*. He dreamed of solving the *Entscheidungsproblem* and thereby solving as corollaries all the famous unsolved problems of mathematics. This was to be the crowning achievement of his life, the achievement that would outshine all the achievements of earlier mathematicians who solved problems only one at a time.

The essence of Hilbert's program was to find a decision process that would operate on symbols in a purely mechanical fashion, without requiring any understanding of their meaning. Since mathematics was reduced to a collection of marks on paper, the decision process should concern itself only with the marks and not with the fallible human intuitions out of which the marks were reduced. In spite of prolonged efforts of Hilbert and his disciples, the *Entscheidungsproblem* was never solved. Success was achieved only in highly restricted domains of mathematics, excluding all the deeper and more interesting concepts. Hilbert never gave up hope, but as the years went by his program became an exercise in formal logic having little connection with real mathematics. Finally, when Hilbert was seventy years old, Kurt Gödel proved by a brilliant analysis that the *Entscheidungsproblem* as Hilbert formulated it cannot be solved.

Gödel proved that, in any formulation of mathematics including the rules of ordinary arithmetic, a formal process for separating statements into true and false cannot exist. He proved the stronger result which is now known as Gödel's Theorem, that in any formalization of mathematics including the rules of ordinary arithmetic there are meaningful arithmetical statements that cannot be proved true or false. Gödel's Theorem shows conclusively that in pure mathematics reductionism does not work. To decide whether a mathematical statement is true, it is not sufficient to reduce the statement to marks on paper and to study the behavior of the marks. Except in trivial cases, you can decide the truth of a statement only by studying its meaning and its context in the larger world of mathematical ideas.

It is a curious paradox that several of the greatest and most creative spirits in science, after achieving important discoveries by following their unfettered imaginations, were in their later years obsessed with reductionist philosophy and as a result became sterile. Hilbert was a prime example of this paradox. Einstein was another. Like Hilbert, Einstein did his great work up to the age of forty without any reductionist bias. His crowning achievement, the general relativistic theory of gravitation, grew out of a deep physical understanding of natural processes. Only at the very end of his ten-year struggle to understand gravitation did he reduce the outcome of his understanding to a finite set of field equations. But like Hilbert, as he grew older he concentrated his attention more and more on the formal properties of his equations, and he lost interest in the wider universe of ideas out of which the equations arose.

His last twenty years were spent in a fruitless search for a set of equations that would unify the whole of physics, without paying attention to the rapidly proliferating experimental discoveries that any unified theory would finally have to explain. I do not need to say more about this tragic and well-known story of Einstein's lonely attempt to reduce physics to a finite set of marks on paper. His attempt failed as dismally as Hilbert's attempt to do the same thing with mathematics. I shall instead discuss another aspect of Einstein's later life, an aspect that has received less attention than his quest for the unified field equations: his extraordinary hostility to the idea of black holes.

Black holes were invented by Oppenheimer and Snyder in 1940. Starting from Einstein's theory of general relativity, Oppenheimer and Snyder found solutions of Einstein's equations that described what happens to a massive star when it has exhausted its supplies of nuclear energy. The star collapses gravitationally and disappears from the visible universe, leaving behind only an intense gravitational field to mark its presence. The star remains in a state of permanent free fall, collapsing endlessly inward into the gravitational pit without ever reaching the bottom. This solution of Einstein's equations was profoundly novel. It has had enormous impact on the later development of astrophysics.

We now know that black holes ranging in mass from a few suns to a few billion suns actually exist and play a dominant role in the economy of the universe. In my opinion, the black hole is incomparably the most exciting and the most important consequence of general relativity. Black holes are the places in the universe where general relativity is decisive. But Einstein never acknowledged his brainchild. Einstein was not merely skeptical, he was actively hostile to the idea of black holes. He thought that the black hole solution was a blemish to be removed from his theory by a better mathematical formulation, not a consequence to be tested by observation. He never expressed the slightest enthusiasm for black holes, either as a concept or as a physical possibility. Oddly enough, Oppenheimer too in later life was uninterested in black holes, although in retrospect we can say that they were his most important contribution to science. The older Einstein and the older Oppenheimer were blind to the mathematical beauty of black holes, and indifferent to the question whether black holes actually exist.

Albert Einstein

How did this blindness and this indifference come about? I never discussed this question directly with Einstein, but I discussed it several times with Oppenheimer and I believe that Oppenheimer's answer applies equally to Einstein. Oppenheimer in his later years believed that the only problem worthy of the attention of a serious theoretical physicist was the discovery of the fundamental equations of physics. Einstein certainly felt the same way. To discover the right equations was all that mattered. Once you had discovered the right equations, then the study of particular solutions of the equations would be a routine exercise for second-rate physicists or graduate students. In Oppenheimer's view, it would be a waste of his precious time, or of mine, to concern ourselves with the details of particular solutions. This was how the philosophy of reductionism led Oppenheimer and Einstein astray. Since the only purpose of physics was to reduce the world of physical phenomena to a finite set of fundamental equations, the study of particular solutions such as black holes was an undesirable distraction from the general goal. Like Hilbert, they were not content to solve particular problems one at a time. They were entranced by the dream of solving all the basic problems at once. And as a result, they failed in their later years to solve any problems at all.

In the history of science it happens not infrequently that a reductionist approach leads to a spectacular success. Frequently the understanding of a complicated system as a whole is impossible without an understanding of its component parts. And sometimes the understanding of a whole field of science is suddenly advanced by the discovery of a single basic equation. Thus it happened that the Schroedinger equation in 1926 and the Dirac equation in 1927 brought a miraculous order into the previously mysterious processes of atomic physics. The equations of Schroedinger and Dirac were triumphs of reductionism. Bewildering complexities of chemistry and physics were reduced to two lines of algebraic symbols. These triumphs were in Oppenheimer's mind when he belittled his own discovery of black holes. Compared with the abstract beauty and simplicity of the Dirac equation, the black hole solution seemed to him ugly, complicated, and lacking in fundamental significance.

But it happens at least equally often in the history of science that the understanding of the component parts of a composite system is impossible without an understanding of the behavior of the system as a whole. And it often happens that the understanding of the mathematical nature of an equation is impossible without a detailed understanding of its solutions. The black hole is a case in point. One could say without exaggeration that Einstein's equations of general relativity were understood only at a very superficial level before the discovery of the black hole. During the fifty years since the black hole was invented, a deep mathematical understanding of the geometrical structure of space–time has slowly emerged, with the black hole solution playing a fundamental role in the structure. The progress of science requires the growth of understanding in both directions, downward from the whole to the parts and upward from the parts to the whole. A reductionist

philosophy, arbitrarily proclaiming that the growth of understanding must go only in one direction, makes no scientific sense. Indeed, dogmatic philosophical beliefs of any kind have no place in science.

Science in its everyday practice is much closer to art than to philosophy. When I look at Gödel's proof of his undecidability theorem, I do not see a philosophical argument. The proof is a soaring piece of architecture, as unique and as lovely as Chartres Cathedral. Gödel took Hilbert's formalized axioms of mathematics as his building blocks and built out of them a lofty structure of ideas into which he could finally insert his undecidable arithmetical statement as the keystone of the arch. The proof is a great work of art. It is a construction, not a reduction. It destroyed Hilbert's dream of reducing all mathematics to a few equations, and replaced it with a greater dream of mathematics as an endlessly growing realm of ideas. Gödel proved that in mathematics the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. Every formalization of mathematics raises questions that reach beyond the limits of the formalism into unexplored territory.

The black hole solution of Einstein's equations is also a work of art. The black hole is not as majestic as Gödel's proof, but it has the essential features of a work of art: uniqueness, beauty, and unexpectedness. Oppenheimer and Snyder built out of Einstein's equations a structure that Einstein had never imagined. The idea of matter in permanent free fall was hidden in the equations, but nobody saw it until it was revealed in the Oppenheimer-Snyder solution. On a much more humble level, my own activities as a theoretical physicist have a similar quality. When I am working, I feel myself to be practicing a craft rather than following a method. When I did my most important piece of work as a young man, putting together the ideas of Tomonaga, Schwinger, and Feynman to obtain a simplified version of quantum electrodynamics, I had consciously in mind a metaphor to describe what I was doing. The metaphor was bridge-building. Tomonaga and Schwinger had built solid foundations on one side of a river of ignorance, Feynman had built solid foundations on the other side, and my job was to design and build the cantilevers reaching out over the water until they met in the middle. The metaphor was a good one. The bridge that I built is still serviceable and still carrying traffic forty years later. The same metaphor describes well the greater work of unification achieved by Weinberg and Salam when they bridged the gap between electrodynamics and the weak interactions. In each case, after the work of unification is done, the whole stands higher than the parts.

In recent years there has been great dispute among historians of science, some believing that science is driven by social forces, others believing that science transcends social forces and is driven by its own internal logic and by the objective facts of nature. Historians of the first group write social history, those of the second group write intellectual history. Since I believe that scientists should be artists and rebels, obeying their own instincts rather than social demands or philosophical principles, I do not fully agree with either view of history. Nevertheless, scientists should pay attention to the historians. We have much to learn, especially from the social historians.

Many years ago, when I was in Zürich, I went to see the play *The Physicists* by the Swiss playwright Dürrenmatt. The characters in the play are grotesque caricatures, wearing the costumes and using the names of Newton, Einstein, and Möbius. The action takes place in a lunatic asylum where the physicists are patients. In the first act they entertain themselves by murdering their nurses, and in the second act they are revealed to be secret agents in the pay of rival intelligence services. I found the play amusing but at the same time irritating. These absurd creatures on the stage had no resemblance at all to any real physicist. I complained about the unreality of the characters to my friend Markus Fierz, a well-known Swiss physicist, who came with me to the play. "But don't you see?" said Fierz, "The whole point of the play is to show us how we look to the rest of the human race."

Fierz was right. The image of noble and virtuous dedication to truth, the image that scientists have traditionally presented to the public, is no longer credible. The public, having found out that the traditional image of the scientist as a secular saint is false, has gone to the opposite extreme and imagines us to be irresponsible devils playing with human lives. Dürrenmatt has held up the mirror to us and has shown us the image of ourselves as the public sees us. It is our task now to dispel these fantasies with facts, showing to the public that scientists are neither saints nor devils but human beings sharing the common weaknesses of our species.

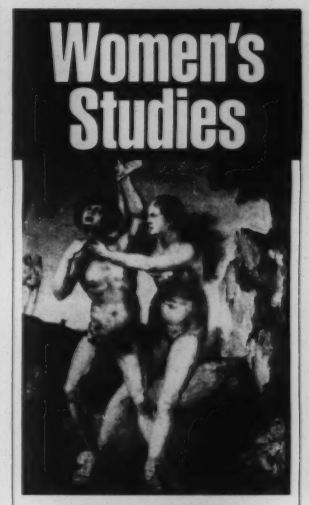
Historians who believe in the transcendence of science have portrayed scientists as living in a transcendent world of the intellect, superior to the transient, corruptible, mundane realities of the social world. Any scientist who claims to follow such exalted ideals is easily held up to ridicule as a pious fraud. We all know that scientists, like television evangelists and politicians, are not immune to the corrupting influences of power and money. Much of the history of science, like the history of religion, is a history of struggles driven by power and money. And yet this is not the whole story. Genuine saints occasionally play an important role, both in religion and in science. Einstein was an important figure in the history of science, and he was a firm believer in transcendence. For Einstein, science as a way of escape from mundane reality was no pretense. For many scientists less divinely gifted than Einstein, the chief reward for being a scientist is not the power and the money but the chance of catching a glimpse of the transcendent beauty of nature.

Both in science and in history there is room for a variety of styles and purposes. There is no necessary contradiction between the transcendence of science and the realities of social history. One may believe that in science nature will ultimately have the last word, and still recognize an enormous role for human vainglory and viciousness in the practice of science before the last word is spoken. One may believe that the historian's job is to expose the hidden influences of power and money, and still recognize that the laws of nature cannot be bent and cannot be corrupted by power and money. To my mind, the history of science is most illuminating when the frailties of human actors are put into juxtaposition with the transcendence of nature's laws.

Francis Crick is one of the great scientists of our century. He has recently published his personal narrative of the microbiological revolution that he helped to bring about, with a title borrowed from Keats, *What Mad Pursuit.* One of the most illuminating passages in his account compares two discoveries in which he was involved. One was the discovery of the double-helix structure of DNA, the other was the discovery of the triple-helix structure of the collagen molecule. Both molecules are biologically important, DNA being the carrier of genetic information, collagen being the protein that holds human bodies together. The two discoveries involved similar scientific techniques and aroused similar competitive passions in the scientists racing to be the first to find the structure.

Crick says that the two discoveries caused him equal excitement and equal pleasure at the time he was working on them. From the point of view of a historian who believes that science is a purely social construction, the two discoveries should have been equally significant. But in history as Crick experienced it, the two helixes were not equal. The double helix became the driving force of a new science, while the triple helix remained a footnote of interest only to specialists. Crick asks the question, how the different fates of the two helixes are to be explained. He answers the question by saying that human and social influences cannot explain the difference, that only the transcendent beauty of the double-helix structure and its genetic function can explain the difference. Nature herself, and not the scientist, decided what was important. In the history of the double helix, transcendence was real. Crick gives himself the credit for choosing an important problem to work on, but, he says, only Nature herself could tell how transcendentally important it would turn out to be.

My message is that science is a human activity, and the best way to understand it is to understand the individual human beings who practice it. Science is an art form and not a philosophical method. The great advances in science usually result from new tools rather than from new doctrines. If we try to squeeze science into a single philosophical viewpoint such as reductionism, we are like Procrustes chopping off the feet of his guests when they do not fit onto his bed. Science flourishes best when it uses freely all the tools at hand, unconstrained by preconceived notions of what science ought to be. Every time we introduce a new tool, it always leads to new and unexpected discoveries, because Nature's imagination is richer than ours. □



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Hanging Out

Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men
by Elliot Liebow.
Little, Brown, 260 pp., $10.95 (paper)

Michael Massing

Almost daily, Newt Gingrich claims that one book or another has inspired his campaign against government welfare, but the most reliable guide to what is happening in Washington now is Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*, published in 1984. While Murray's more recent *The Bell Curve* has attracted much attention, his earlier book has had far more practical impact. Murray's argument—that welfare programs helped to create the underclass and so should, on the whole, be abolished—seemed dangerously radical at the time; today, it is hard to find a politician of either party who would disagree with it. The movement for "welfare reform" (a sanitized phrase that Orwell would have appreciated) can be traced back in no small part to Murray's book. Ever since it appeared, liberals have been on the intellectual defensive.

In a sense, their predicament dates back to 1965, when Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued his famous report citing the breakdown of the black family as the principal cause of poverty in America. Since then, liberals have tried to counter right-wing rhetoric about illegitimacy, single parenthood, and "family values," but without much success. When Dan Quayle criticized Murphy Brown for promoting unwed motherhood, for example, liberals rushed to ridicule him, but in the end many conceded that—as an *Atlantic Monthly* cover line put it—"Dan Quayle Was Right."

With the Republicans preparing to abolish what remains of the Great Society, the Democrats might consider re-examining a text about the actual condition of poor people that was published twenty-eight years ago. Among works of sociology, Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* is considered one of the classics of American urban literature, but outside the university the book today is rarely mentioned. Reading it recently for the first time, I was struck by the originality of its analysis, the vigor of its argument, and—even today—the freshness of its insights into the roots of poverty in the United States. The book offers a sharp counterpoint to the punitive ideas now circulating in Washington.

One reason *Tally's Corner* is not better remembered is that it has been overshadowed by that other classic of the 1960s, Michael Harrington's *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. Published in 1962, *The Other America* has remained fixed in the public mind as the book that helped to launch the War on Poverty. As an exposé of the persistence and pervasiveness of poverty in the United States, *The Other America* was indeed important. As an analysis of the causes of poverty, however, the book was less successful. Harrington put it together from notes he made during hurried trips around the country, and in retrospect, his field techniques seem almost comic. "While I was doing research for this book in Harlem," he writes,

> I was walking around with a notebook. I stopped on Lenox Avenue to take down some prices in the window of a barbecue joint. When I looked up, everyone was watching me. I knew what they thought, and turned to the two men nearest me and said, "I'm not a cop." When I walked over and started to tell them that I was a writer, one accepted the story. The other listened for a moment, and then said, "I still think he's from the police." Then they were gone.

As a result of such mistrust, Harrington had to rely on secondhand sources. A welfare worker in Los Angeles, for instance, informed him that blacks were better able to survive on welfare than whites. "The Negroes," Harrington observes, "as members of the hereditary poor, have a much more balanced diet of cheap food, even if it is fat back and greens. The result is that the whites are much more prone to the classic health problems of poverty (overweight, anemia, and cardiac) than the Negroes." Not only is this factually wrong—blacks suffer more from heart disease and related ailments than almost any other group—but the passage reeks of the sort of stereotyping one does not expect to find in a sophisticated social observer.

Photograph by Helen Levitt (detail)

More generally, Harrington subscribed to the view of the anthropologist Oscar Lewis that poverty was a depressed way of life ingrained in poor people and passed on, as the "culture of poverty," from one generation to the next. Though Lewis had done most of his research in Mexico, he asserted—without much evidence—that his findings could be applied to poor people throughout the world. Harrington accepted this. The United States, he wrote,

> contains an underdeveloped nation, a culture of poverty. Its inhabitants do not suffer the extreme privation of the peasants of Asia or the tribesmen of Africa, yet the mechanism of the misery is similar. They are beyond history, beyond progress, sunk in a paralyzing, maiming routine.

On the face of it, this is an absurd statement. The "mechanism of misery" at work in, say, China, with its billion inhabitants, backward technology, and despotic political system, or the Sudan, with its harsh climate, nomadic population, and semi-feudal society, is completely different from the situation in the United States, where a racial minority has failed to share in the general prosperity of an advanced nation.

The Other America sold just a few thousand copies when it first appeared. It was only after Dwight Macdonald gave it a lengthy and laudatory review in *The New Yorker* that the book caught the attention of President Kennedy and found a broader audience. Since then, *The Other America* has sold more than a million copies. Today, it is worth reading mainly for what it says about the period in which it was written.

In the same year that *The Other America* appeared, Elliot Liebow began working with a team of researchers studying the child-rearing practices of low-income families in the District of Columbia. Supported by the National Institute of Mental Health, the project collected data through interviews with residents of the ghetto. Most of the interviews were with women and children, a group far easier to reach than inner-city men. Liebow was hired to talk with the latter.

A thirty-seven-year-old doctoral student, Liebow was the son of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and had been born and raised in the black neighborhoods in Washington where his father ran a grocery store. It was only after Liebow dropped out of high school and joined the Marines that he moved in a mostly white world. He earned a high-school diploma through correspondence courses during the war and took a degree after the war in English literature from George Washington University. He was studying for a doctorate in anthropology when he joined the research project on poor families in Washington.

Trying to make his way in the world of inner-city males, Liebow began hanging out on a street corner in downtown Washington, within walking distance of the White House. On his second day, he met Tally, a black thirty-one-year-old construction worker who had never attended school. The two went to a coffee shop across the street, where they talked for four hours, becoming fast friends. The shop, which sold mainly hamburgers and coffee and had a jukebox and a pinball machine, was a favorite meeting place for men in the neighborhood, and Tally introduced Liebow around. During the next eighteen months, he got to know about two dozen of them, ranging in age from the early twenties to mid-forties. The men were construction workers, truck drivers, janitors, dishwashers, and clerks, some of them unemployed. They allowed Liebow into their lives, letting him drop by their apartments whenever he wanted. On weekends, he would attend their parties, go out drinking with them, listen to their music. With new people constantly moving into the neighborhood, Liebow soon found himself being viewed as an old-timer, the only white man accepted in an otherwise completely black world.

Liebow turned his research into a doctoral dissertation and sent the manuscript to Little, Brown, which decided to publish it. It originally sold barely three thousand copies, but when it appeared in paperback, word about it quickly spread, especially on college campuses, and by now it has sold more than 700,000 copies.

Only 260 pages long, *Tally's Corner* is a quietly eloquent book, with Liebow patiently guiding the reader through an unfamiliar and at times mystifying world. His iconoclasm is apparent from the book's opening pages, in which he explains why it's important to study "streetcorner men." "Much of what we know of Negro families in poverty," Liebow writes, has been "biased by an emphasis on women and children and a corresponding neglect of adult males." One result, he adds,

> is that family studies among low-income urban groups tend to deal with "female-centered" households, so that one comes away with a picture of the low-income urban world as one peopled mainly with women and children. The adult male, if not simply characterizeu as "absent," is depicted as a somewhat shadowy figure who drifts in and out of the lives of the family members.

Liebow writes that he wanted to look at these men "in much the same way they look at themselves," as breadwinners, fathers, husbands, lovers, and friends.

In his chapter "Men and Jobs," Liebow examines how the men he came to know view work. He describes

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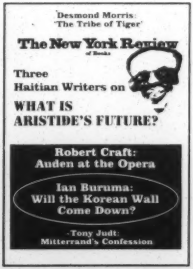

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a pickup truck driving slowly down the street on a weekday morning, its white driver asking the men who are standing around if they want a day's work. On the coffee shop's corner, five men debate the question briefly, then shake their heads no; others nearby refuse as well. Before disappearing down the street the driver has managed to recruit only two men. Liebow imagines what is going through the driver's mind. "Singly or in groups," he writes, "belly-empty or belly-full, sullen or gregarious, drunk or sober, they confirm what he has read, heard and knows from his own experience: these men wouldn't take a job if it were handed to them on a platter."

But the reality is more complicated, Liebow suggests. First, many of the men on the street do have jobs—they just happen to work at night or later in the day, or have the day off. Some, like Tally, have already come back from construction sites because the weather is too damp or too cold to allow work to continue. Others are physically or mentally disabled. Still, Liebow notes, there remains a number of able-bodied men who "have no visible means of support, legal or illegal, who neither have jobs nor want them." More generally, Liebow writes, at any given moment a job "may occupy a relatively low position on the streetcorner scale of real values."

There are many reasons for this, he notes. Some have to do with the nature of the work itself. In 1962, menial jobs such as stock clerk and delivery boy typically paid a dollar an hour, or $35 to $50 a week—a paltry sum, even by the standards of the 1960s. Construction work paid somewhat better—$1.50 to $2.60 an hour—but had its own disadvantages. For one thing, construction work is seasonal, beginning early in the spring and tapering off as winter begins. Even during the good months, bad weather frequently causes interruptions. As a construction project moves from one phase to another, laborers are frequently laid off, usually without warning. Getting the job itself is often highly competitive, with unions making it difficult for a nonunion member to get many low-level jobs. For many, the digging, lifting, and lugging involved in construction work is too strenuous. At the same time, conveyer belts, mechanized forklifts, and other technological innovations have eliminated many unskilled jobs.

On the whole, the jobs available to these men are hardly desirable. Even a man "who is able and willing to work cannot earn enough money to support himself, his wife, and one or more children," Liebow writes. "A man's chances for working regularly are good only if he is willing to work for less than he can live on, and sometimes not even then....the higher the wage rate, the more difficult it is to get the job, and the less the job security."

Such considerations shape the men's attitudes toward work. "Each man," Liebow observes, "comes to the job with a long job history characterized by his not being able to support himself and his family. Each man carries this knowledge, born of his experience, with him. He comes to the job flat and stale, wearied by the sameness of it all, convinced of his own incompetence, terrified of responsibility—of being tested still again and found wanting." Convinced of their inadequacies, these men gravitate "to the menial, routine jobs which offer no challenge—and therefore pose no threat—to the already diminished images they have of themselves." In contrast to professional positions, these jobs "are not, by and large, the starting point of a track system which leads to even better jobs for those who are able and willing to do them"; they are, mostly, a "dead end."

Each man's experience with work, in turn, strongly affects his family life. Most of the men Liebow writes about are, or have been, married, but the experience is rarely a happy one. Their wives bring certain expectations to the relationship—many of them relating to money. "To pay the rent, buy the groceries, and provide for the other necessary goods and services is the sine qua non of a good husband," Liebow observes. Yet because of the nature of their jobs, few of these men are able to make such payments. The "Negro menial worker remains a menial worker so that, after one or two or three years of marriage and as many children, the man who could not support his family from the very beginning is even less able to support it as time goes on." Thus, he adds,

> marriage is an occasion of failure. To stay married is to live with your failure, to be confronted by it day in and day out. It is to live in a world whose standards of manliness are forever beyond one's reach, where one is continuously tested and challenged and continually found wanting.

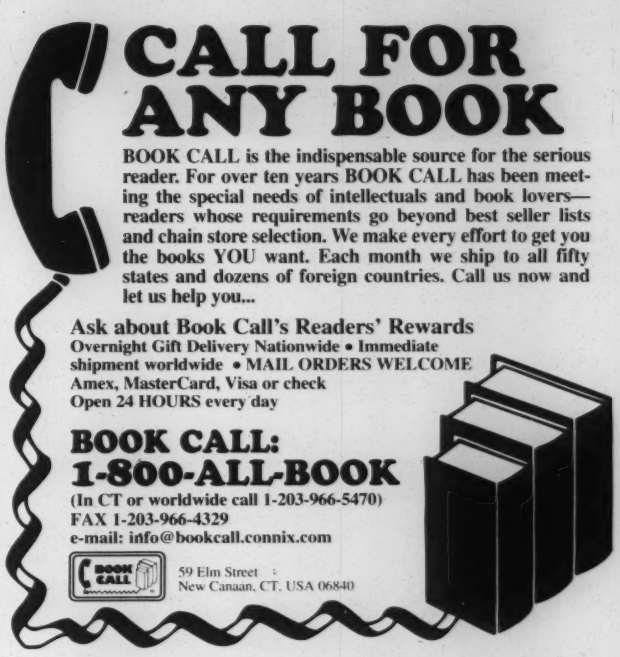
Unable to provide for his family, the man may sink into depression or rage "at the humiliation of it all." In frustration, he sometimes strikes his wife or children. Increasingly, he turns to the street corner, a "sanctuary for those who can no longer endure the experience or prospect of failure."

On the corner, the man's flaws are magically transformed into virtues. His inability to meet the demands of marriage is seen as evidence of his masculinity—his "manly flaws," Liebow calls them. If a man drinks too much, or chases after women, it's because he has too much "dog" in him. "Men are just dogs!" a man called Sea Cat tells him. "We shouldn't call ourselves human, we're just dogs, dogs, dogs! They call me a dog, 'cause that's what I am, but so is everybody else—hopping around from woman to woman, just like a dog." Resounding with such bravado, the street corner provides a carefully defined and comforting world.

Yet it is a place of resignation and defeat as well. "At the moment [the man's] streetcorner relationships take precedence over his wife and children," Liebow writes, he

> comes into his full inheritance bequeathed him by his parents, teachers, employers and society at large. This is the step into failure from which few if any return, and it is at this point that the rest of society can wring its hands or rejoice in the certain knowledge that he has ended up precisely as they had predicted he would.

Liebow rejects the notion that the street-corner men belong to a distinct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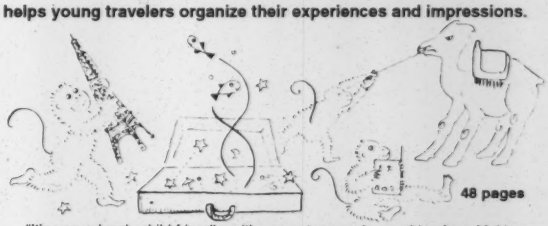

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culture of poverty, irrevocably cut off from the attitudes and values of middle-class America. On the contrary, he believes, these men share the goals of the larger society but are unable to achieve them; their behavior reflects an effort to conceal this failure from themselves and others. Adopting such a perspective, Liebow writes, has practical implications for public policy:

> We do not have to see the problem in terms of breaking into a puncture proof circle, of trying to change values, of disrupting the lines of communication between parent and child so that parents cannot make children in their own image, thereby transmitting their culture inexorably, ad infinitum.

Many of the similarities between the lower-class black father and son, or mother and daughter, Liebow writes, result not from "cultural transmission" but from the fact that the "son goes out and independently experiences the same failures, in the same areas, and for much the same reasons as his father." The problem is "how to change the conditions which, by guaranteeing failure, cause the son to be made in the image of the father."

In what is perhaps the key passage of *Tally's Corner*, Liebow writes that the "inability of the Negro man to earn a living and support his family" is "the central fact of lower-class Negro life."

> If there is to be a change in this way of life, this central fact must be changed; the Negro man, along with everyone else, must be given the skills to earn a living and an opportunity to put these skills to work.

Liebow readily acknowledges the difficulty of this task. For many black men, jobs alone are not enough; before he can earn a living, he must have some confidence that he can do so, and his wife and children must come to believe this as well. As a result, Liebow writes, government and private agencies should be intervening simultaneously "at all points in the life cycle":

> Children and young people must have good schools and good teachers who can give them the skills and the training to compete for jobs and careers, and they must have teachers who believe in them and help them believe in themselves. Jobs that pay enough to support a family must be opened up to the adult generation so that they can support their families, so that the young people can see the changed reality, so that young and old can experience it and gain a vested interest in the world they live in.

What is lacking, Liebow concludes, "is not know-how and programs but a clarity of purpose, of motive, and of intention."

By today's standards, Liebow's coffee shop seems almost quaint. Back then, there were virtually no crackheads or junkies milling about the corner, no drive-by shootings to duck. However precarious the men's finances, all at least had a roof over their heads. Compared to the legions of drug-addled men who today sleep in cardboard boxes and forage in trash cans, Tally's friends live in a world that seems almost utopian. Indeed, if Liebow's book has a fault, it is the somewhat gilded picture he provides of street-corner society. Brawling and drinking and even a murder take place in *Tally's Corner*, but Liebow describes it all with such charm and humor as to make it seem almost innocuous.

Yet his empathy gave him some insights that remain relevant three decades later. Today, as in the early 1960s, low-income African-American males have been neglected by researchers, writers, and policymakers. They seem too hard to reach, too difficult to change, susceptible only to harsh measures. Even women are coming to be seen this way, as the current war on welfare mothers suggests. Increasingly, society is placing its hopes on the next generation. "Crux of Welfare Debate Becomes Reform's Effect on Children," a *Washington Post* headline recently declared, summing up this perspective. Both liberals and conservatives adhere to it. On the one hand, we have Newt Gingrich's proposal for taking some poor children from their parents and placing them in orphanages. On the other, we have liberals arguing for Head Start, after-school programs, and midnight basketball leagues. One approach is punitive, the other compassionate, but both grow out of a similar conviction that inner-city adults are too damaged to be healed, that society must get to their kids before they are similarly impaired. Such a tendency was present even in Liebow's time. "It is commonly assumed," he wrote, "that it is too late to do anything about the values, goals and life styles of adults but that there is still time, perhaps, to effect a change in children whose ways of thinking and behaving have not yet settled into the traditional mold prescribed by their parents or by the conditions of lower-class life."

Liebow strongly objected to this approach. No matter how generously society provides programs for children, he believed, they are doomed to fail if the problems of poor adults are not simultaneously addressed. Hence his insistence on intervening at all periods of life. Until black youths see their fathers succeed in society, they will lack confidence in their own ability to succeed, regardless of how much extra schooling and training they receive. And until black men and women can help support their families, those youths seem unlikely to live in an environment in which they feel they can advance.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan was right to point to the deterioration of the black family as a crucial factor in the growth of the underclass. Yet as *Tally's Corner* suggests, black family life is itself highly susceptible to broader forces in American society. Among the most important of these is the nature and availability of work. Liebow's achievement was to show how economic realities mold the attitudes of black men and, in turn, affect the fortunes of the black family. It is not simply promiscuity, illegitimacy, and irresponsibility that account for the deepening woes of the inner city, but also stagnant wages, the decline in unskilled jobs, and persistently high rates of unemployment. As the Annie E. Casey Foundation recently reported, the proportion of men 25 to 34 years old earning less than the amount needed to lift a family of four above the poverty line increased from 13.6 percent in 1969 to 32.2 percent in 1993.* So long as black adults have trouble finding decent-paying work, the black family's woes will continue.

Of course, the prospect of providing such work may cause society simply to "wring its hands," as Liebow put it. In today's atmosphere, the untrained and the undereducated seem doomed to fight among themselves for the economic scraps. Yet there is much that the government could do, starting with the minimum wage. At $4.25 an hour, this works out to about $9,000 a year—barely above the poverty level. Raising this floor would help provide something more closely resembling a living wage for those at the bottom of the scale. Even then, there simply is not enough work to go around. In the end, addressing the problem of the underclass would require programs to provide jobs. Certainly there is no lack of tasks to be done. In the nation's cities, for instance, people could be put to work cleaning streets and subway stations, maintaining parks, painting buildings, and otherwise improving the urban landscape. This may sound utopian, but such programs are already being tested in many parts of the country. In Manhattan, for instance, the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation is paying formerly homeless people to keep the park clean. As anyone who has visited it recently can see, the program has succeeded admirably.

In Washington, however, the idea of putting people to work is dismissed as naive, unworkable, un-American. Even the notion of raising the minimum wage elicits howls of protest, and not just from conservatives. In *The Washington Post* recently, James K. Glassman, a former publisher of *The New Republic*, argued for abolishing the minimum wage altogether. "Ultimately the cure for low working wages may be nothing more mysterious than high personal diligence," he wrote in a column that shows how thoroughly the Republicans' ideas have taken over. As long as such thinking persists, so will the desperation in our cities.

Elliot Liebow himself lived long enough to witness the consequences of society's neglect. After writing *Tally's Corner*, he went to work at the National Institute of Mental Health, remaining there until 1984, when he was diagnosed with cancer. Told he had less than a year to live, Liebow began volunteering at a soup kitchen and a homeless shelter for women. When he realized that he was not going to die immediately, he began taking notes, and in 1993 he came out with *Tell Them Who I Am*, a study of homeless women that, like *Tally's Corner*, attempts to describe the world of social outcasts as they themselves perceive it. Last September, Liebow died, an event that received as little notice as his moving and pioneering first book. □

*See *The New York Times*, April 25, 1995, p. A14.

The Riddle of Walter Benjamin

Mark Lilla

The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940
edited and annotated by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, translated by Manfred Jacobson and Evelyn Jacobson.
University of Chicago Press, 651 pp., $45.00

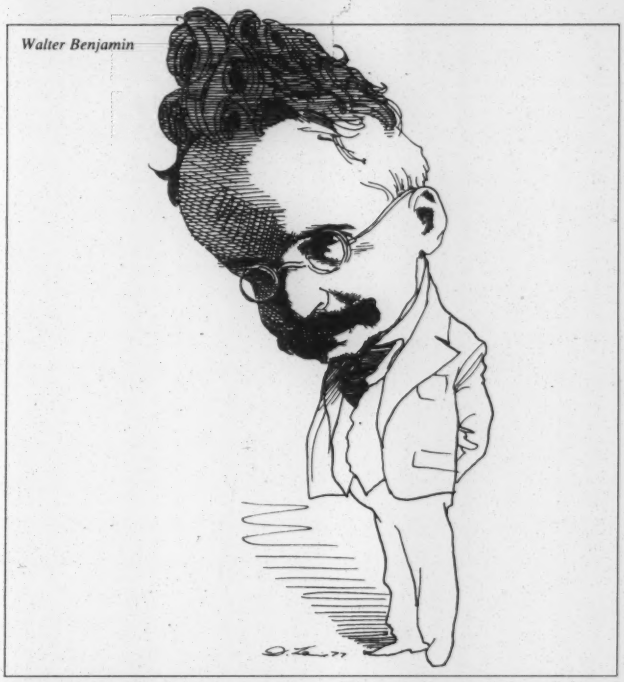
1.

In 1968 Hannah Arendt edited *Illuminations*, the first collection of essays by Walter Benjamin to appear in English. At that time little was known about Benjamin outside Germany, except that he was a talented and idiosyncratic literary critic who had committed suicide while fleeing the Nazis in 1940. The essays Arendt selected for *Illuminations* primarily reflected his literary achievements. Most of the volume consists of dense ruminations on Kafka, Baudelaire, Proust, Brecht, and Leskov, and it includes a charming essay on book collecting. Only the last two essays, on the mechanical reproduction of art works and on the philosophy of history, give any clue to Benjamin's more profound philosophical ambitions.

In Germany, however, a bitter debate was already raging over those ambitions when *Illuminations* appeared. Theodor Adorno and his wife, Gretel, had edited the first German collection of Benjamin's selected writings in the mid-Fifties. This two-volume set was intended to secure Benjamin's place in the pantheon of the Frankfurt School, which had supported and published him in the 1930s. In the Sixties, however, the Adornos came under strong, generally unscrupulous, attack by members of the German New Left, who charged them with bowdlerizing Benjamin's revolutionary Marxism. This political dispute was only intensified with the publication in 1966 of Benjamin's selected correspondence, edited jointly by Adorno and the Jewish historian Gershom Scholem, one of Benjamin's oldest friends.

These letters showed that although Benjamin professed to be a Marxist of sorts from the mid-Twenties on, from his first days to his last he was profoundly absorbed by theological questions. This aspect of his thought appears most clearly in his exchanges with Scholem, which make up the largest surviving portion of his correspondence. What began in Germany as a narrow squabble over Benjamin's legacy soon became a significant controversy over the relation between political and theological ideas.

In spite of Benjamin's lifelong preoccupation with theology and politics, English-speaking readers have largely concentrated on his literary criticism and ignored his philosophical writings, which have been central to his readers on the continent. The sorry state of English editions of his works has only perpetuated our provinciality in this regard. A second collection of essays chosen by Arendt was published in 1978, three years after her death, under the title *Reflections*, and, in the years since, two of Benjamin's three completed books have appeared in English, along with a few collections containing newly translated essays. These publications, however, are only a small fraction of Benjamin's writings.[1]



Walter Benjamin

Despite the lack of material—or perhaps because of it—an enormous Anglo-American industry of post-structuralist and postmodernist interpretation has grown up around the translations we have, distorting Benjamin's real concerns. Apart from specialists familiar with the German background to his work, English-speaking readers are probably no closer to understanding Benjamin's writings than they were when Hannah Arendt first introduced him in America over twenty-five years ago.[2]

The appearance of a translation of Benjamin's correspondence is, therefore, an important event. Even an edition as imperfect and occasionally misleading as this one adds much to our understanding of him.[3] When this volume joins the new edition of Benjamin translations to be published by Harvard University Press, it should help to transform the English-language study of his life and works.[4]

2.

Walter Benjamin was born into a well-off family of Berlin Jews in 1892. His father had made a modest fortune as an auctioneer and art dealer, and later expanded it as an investor. Benjamin wrote two memoirs of his youth, "A Berlin Chronicle" and "Berlin Childhood," bittersweet reflections on his privileged upbringing in the well-to-do western section of the city, filled with memories of promenades, cool relations with his parents, and absurd luxury. Because young Walter was somewhat sickly as a boy, his parents sent him away for two years to a provincial boarding school, one of whose directors, Gustav Wyneken, was a major force in the German Youth Movement. Benjamin soon began writing for one of the movement's journals, *Der Anfang*, and remained allied with Wyneken and his Nietzschean pedagogical movement until the First World War.

Benjamin's early correspondence contains much discussion of the Youth Movement, though one also witnesses his growing awareness of his status as a Jew in Germany. We know little about the Benjamin family's attitude toward Judaism except that they were liberal without being entirely assimilated. We learn here that young Walter, like many German Jews drawn to the early essays of Martin Buber, flirted with political Zionism in the summer of 1912. But in a letter to his friend Ludwig Strauss later that September, he wrote: "I see three Zionist forms of Jewishness: Palestine Zionism (a natural necessity); German Zionism in its halfness; and cultural Zionism, which sees Jewish values *everywhere* and works for them. Here I will stay, and I believe I must stay." This would remain his position throughout his life.[5]

Benjamin's attitude toward political Zionism reflected a more fundamental inclination to escape the ugly political atmosphere of the period. Among the surprises contained in these letters is the utter absence of political commentary as the First World War began, and its meagerness for some years thereafter. Benjamin first appears to us as an "unpolitical man"—if not quite like Thomas Mann, then like so many others of his generation who abandoned the faltering institutions of bourgeois Europe in order to explore aesthetic experience and irrationalist "philosophies of life" (*Lebensphilosophien*).

Nonetheless, despite Benjamin's attempts to ignore the war, it intruded from every side. In August 1914, in

[1] R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, editors, *Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften*, seven volumes (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989).

[2] Apart from George Steiner's occasional essays on Benjamin, the clearest account of the Continental debates over his theological and political views has been afforded by the journal *New German Critique* and the writers associated with it. Among them are Richard Wolin, whose *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* has recently been reissued with a superb new introduction (University of California Press, 1994), and Gary Smith, who has edited an important collection of Continental critical essays, *On Walter Benjamin* (MIT Press, 1988). Anson Rabinbach has offered the most penetrating treatment of the theological-political problem in his "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Messianism," *New German Critique* (Winter 1985) and his introduction to *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940* (Schocken, 1989).

[3] The reader's gratitude for this volume will be muted by the fact that the University of Chicago Press was unable to add any critical apparatus, owing to contractual constraints. For reasons of its own, the press also chose to offer little information about the book's relation to the German original, and some of that is incorrect. A short "Note on Sources" makes the strange claim that, while the original edition was copyrighted in 1966, it "was published only in 1978." (In fact the book was published in 1966; the 1978 edition was a revised one.) It then notes that 33 of the 332 letters were originally translated in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, without further elaboration. That important volume, however, is the translation of a 1980 German collection that includes a great number of Scholem's own letters to Benjamin, which were miraculously preserved in an East German archive and finally released in 1977. The relation between the book under review and these four other volumes—the two German editions of the Benjamin letters, and the German and English editions of the Scholem-Benjamin correspondence from 1932 to 1940—is left utterly obscure. Nor do we learn that new editions of Benjamin's letters are currently being prepared in Germany, one of which has just appeared: *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, Briefwechsel, 1928–1940* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994).

[4] Besides a forthcoming edition of Benjamin's Arcades Project, Harvard has commissioned translations for a six-volume *Works*, selected and edited by Michael Jennings of Princeton.

[5] This letter, not included in the English edition and only incompletely in the *Gesammelte Schriften*, is translated from the original copy in Jerusalem by Anson Rabinbach in his "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse," p. 96.

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despair over the coming catastrophe, two of his closest friends committed suicide together in the apartment where his Berlin circle often gathered. Not long afterward Wyneken published a nationalistic manifesto, "Youth and War," provoking Benjamin to dissociate himself from his former teacher and the Youth Movement. He obtained an exemption from military service in 1917 by faking an attack of sciatica, and by that summer was in voluntary exile in Switzerland with his wife, Dora, whom he had married that April. His new friend Gershom Scholem, who obtained an exemption by feigning mental illness, arrived in Bern in 1918, and they began the intense intellectual exchange that would prove so fruitful for both men.

Scholem and Benjamin had first met in 1915, though Scholem remembered seeing Benjamin participate in a public debate on Zionism two years earlier. As Scholem recounted in his two memoirs, he and the older Benjamin were immediately drawn to each other, despite philosophical and religious differences. Scholem, too, had grown up in the bosom of the liberal Judaism of Berlin, but he was appalled by the cultural compromises it represented, with both Christmas trees and menorahs. When he received a picture of Theodor Herzl as a Christmas present one year, he was so disgusted that he began to learn Hebrew, mastering it quickly. By 1917 his family had turned him out of the house for becoming a Zionist, and he had decided to study the history of Kabbala.

Benjamin did not share this passion and did not even know Hebrew. But Scholem sensed in Benjamin a "devotion to the spiritual like that of a scribe cast out into another world, who has set off in search of his 'scripture.'"[6] The more Scholem studied the traditions of Jewish mysticism and messianism, the more he came to see Benjamin as "a theologian marooned in the realm of the profane."[7]

The publication of Benjamin's correspondence in Germany drew attention for the first time to his early philosophical writings, with their strong theological overtones. Read along with the letters of the period, they largely confirm Scholem's instinct about the spiritual temperament of his friend. One of the earliest of his writings to survive is a short, unpublished manuscript of 1917–1918 entitled "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy."[8] Both Benjamin and Scholem had begun their philosophical studies by reading Kant, whose work had recently been revived at the University of Marburg. Like the early Romantics, they were simultaneously attracted and repelled by Kant's rigorous distinction between the phenomenal world open to science and the noumenal world of moral ends; they were attracted by the recognition of a metaphysical realm beyond the material, repelled by the needle's eye that Kant placed between the two. Benjamin took it as a philosophical challenge to overcome Kant's distinction within the frame of Kant's own thought, calling this "the central task of the coming philosophy." What philosophy needs, he writes, is the "epistemological foundation of a higher concept of experience," which will make "religious experience logically possible." This theological conception of experience is echoed in a 1918 letter to Scholem, in which Benjamin states that all ethics need a foundation in metaphysics, in order to understand "the absolute divine context of order, whose highest sphere is doctrine and whose embodiment and first cause is God."

Statements like these are commonplaces in the history of philosophical Romanticism. The desire to reaffirm religious experience in the wake of Enlightenment secularism had long before been expressed in the works of Hamann, Jacobi, Schleiermacher, Novalis, and Friedrich Schlegel. Typically, such writers turned toward a crypto-theological view of language as an alternative to Kant's philosophy, and Benjamin followed their lead. In 1916 he wrote to Martin Buber:

> Every action that derives from the expansive tendency to string words together seems terrible to me.... I can understand writing as such as poetic, prophetic, objective in terms of its effect, but in any case only as *magical*, that is as un-*mediated*.

To Hugo von Hofmannsthal he later remarked that "every truth has its home, its ancestral palace, in language."

Benjamin attempted to elaborate these intuitions about language and truth in a difficult essay, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916). Here he rejects the "bourgeois" view that language is based on conventions in favor of the "mystical" view that names are divine essences, which had become obscured and confused after Babel. Benjamin, however, insists that by translating human languages into one another, men can begin to reconstruct the "nameless, unspoken" language of nature, which is a "residue of the creative word of God" and out of which "the ultimate clarity of the word of God unfolds."[9]

Benjamin was aware that he was treading on the Romantics' path, and over the next few years set out to confront them directly. He did so in his first scholarly dissertation and only traditionally academic book, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism), which was accepted by the faculty at Bern in 1919. In it he argues that criticism can be so powerful that it becomes more valuable than artistic creation itself. The nineteenth-century Romantics valued criticism because they idealized the poet, the writer, the painter; Benjamin idealizes the critic as a conjurer teasing truths out of the objects in which they have been sealed. "Through Kant's philosophical works," he writes, "the concept of *criticism* took on an almost magical meaning for the younger generation.... To be critical meant to raise thought so far above all constraint that, through the perception of the falseness of constraints, knowledge of the truth takes flight as if by magic."[10]

This view would have the most far-reaching consequences for Benjamin's career. He develops it further in his famous essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, which begins with the bold claim that what the reader holds in his hands is not "commentary" but criticism, which "seeks the truth content of a work of art." This task is then given a mystical formulation:

> If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Where for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of the past and the light ashes of experience.[11]

For Benjamin, then still in his late twenties, this invocation of alchemy may have been no more than a simile, but his friend Scholem took such statements very seriously. Scholem shared Benjamin's dissatisfaction with Kant and with the denatured "liberal" theology that grew up in his wake; Scholem, too, found the bourgeois pieties of Wilhelmine culture empty and stifling. But rather than turn to Romanticism, he began to study the mystical kabbalistic texts of medieval Judaism, from which he hoped to gain historical perspective on the spiritual dissatisfactions with "debased" experience, to learn how they arose in the history of religion, and to understand the reactions to them. This is the light in which he began to see Benjamin's early writings—and it is a clarifying light.

Scholem's research taught him that Judaism had always experienced a deep tension between the discipline of the law, which was a preparation for redemption, and a powerful messianic impulse, which regularly strained against such discipline and sought immediate, direct contact with the divine. This impulse was antinomian, apocalyptic, and utopian. It rejected any simple appeal to tradition or historical progress, believing instead in "transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed into ruins because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source." Traditionally, Jewish orthodoxy had tried to stifle this impulse, going so far as to deny or distort its history. But all such efforts were doomed because "the power of redemption seems to be built into the

[6] Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), p. 53.

[7] Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (Schocken, 1976), p. 187.

[8] Recently translated in Gary Smith, editor, *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 1–12.

[9] This strong theory of translation as unlocking an original, revealed language appears again in Benjamin's 1923 introduction to Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, titled "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations*.

[10] "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik," *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume I.1, p. 51.

[11] *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I.1, pp. 125–126, 195. I am grateful to Professor Stanley Corngold of Princeton University for sharing with me his excellent translation of the essay, which will appear in the Harvard edition of Benjamin's works.

clockwork of life lived in the light of revelation." The "anarchic breeze" of messianism was destined to blow through the house of orthodoxy whenever the living sources of religion had been relegated to the cellar. "It is a profound truth," Scholem writes, "that a well-ordered house is a dangerous thing."[12]

In his view, German Judaism of the early twentieth century was one such house. Hermann Cohen, the leading figure of the neo-Kantian philosophical school, was the most prominent proponent of reinterpreting Judaism as an ethical system, which he undertook in works such as *The Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (1929).[13] In his other writings Cohen asserted that Jews and Germans could exist harmoniously in a liberal society, which he considered Germany to be. Against this consensus an entire generation of young Jewish thinkers would rebel, some before World War I, others just after. Scholem and Benjamin belonged to this generation, as did Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Franz Kafka, Ernst Bloch, and Leo Strauss. In their letters, Scholem and Benjamin seem very conscious of their affinities with these writers, and they discuss them frequently. Both were particularly taken with Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* (1921), which they considered a significant critique of both Kantianism and liberal Judaism, and with the stories of Kafka, which offered, as Scholem later put it, "an intuitive affirmation of mystical themes which walk a fine line between religion and nihilism."[14]

This "fine line" is the kabbalistic line, and the more Scholem followed it in Jewish history, the more he believed he could trace its path through his generation of Jewish youth seeking redemption in a profane world. Within this generation, no figure attracted and perplexed him more than Benjamin. Beneath Benjamin's complaints about the poverty of modern experience or the coldness of reason, beneath his vitalistic celebrations of art and language, Scholem heard the age-old voice of those called "masters of a holy soul" in kabbalistic lore.[15] Such souls were blessed with great powers of perception and were capable of reviving desiccated religious cultures. But, as Scholem also knew, they were equally vulnerable to illusion and self-destruction—especially under modern secular conditions, and especially when they turned to politics.

3.

Benjamin's interest in political questions began to develop only in the Twenties, after the war and just as his private life was beginning to unravel. In 1920 economic conditions in Germany forced his return from Switzerland, and once in Berlin he fell out with his parents, who were putting pressure on him to find a regular job. To complicate matters further, in 1921 both Benjamin and his wife, Dora, fell in love with other people—she with Walter's old schoolmate Ernst Schoen, he with the sculptress Jula Cohn, the sister of another friend. A temporary separation was agreed upon, then a reconciliation for the sake of their young son. Neither affair lasted, but the marriage was shattered and the couple finally divorced in 1930.

Although the outward shape of Benjamin's life changed dramatically during this trying period, his first political writings show remarkable continuity with the theological speculations of his Swiss years. In 1920 he published "The Critique of Violence," a dense and not altogether successful essay on Georges Sorel's *Réflections sur la violence*, which was becoming a key text for thinkers on the radical right and left. Benjamin criticizes Sorel, but he shares Sorel's view that bourgeois life and parliamentary politics are based on an illegitimate official violence, and he proposes that a different kind of violence—a regenerative, "law-making" violence—can bring about a new social order. Less explicit about violence, but no less apocalyptic, is the short "Theologico-Political Fragment" written later that year. Here Benjamin writes that although "only the Messiah himself consummates all history," history does not prepare for his arrival: the messianic moment comes unannounced, bringing history to an abrupt, perhaps violent stop. To strive for the passing away of the natural world is, Benjamin says here, "the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism."

If Benjamin had never written another word about politics after these essays, we would probably understand him today as a proponent of that diffuse strain of vitalism in early twentieth-century Continental thought that drew many intellectuals to radical right-wing views and movements after World War I. As a young man Benjamin had sought out Ludwig Klages, the popular (and later anti-Semitic) philosopher whose magnum opus, *The Mind as Adversary of the Soul*, attacks the rationalistic tradition of Western philosophy for distorting the vitalistic sources of knowledge, will, and aesthetic experience.[16] Benjamin also carefully studied and wrote on the works of Johann Jakob Bachofen, the nineteenth-century ethnologist whose theories of pagan myth and symbols had recently been promoted by the Stefan George circle, of which Klages was an early member. Benjamin's correspondence shows that throughout his life he was fascinated with these right-wing theorists of myth, eroticism, power, dreams, and imagination—though it must be added that he was always repelled by their politics once he understood them.[17]

Benjamin's notion of criticism as alchemy, his conviction that politics is a matter of apocalyptic nihilism, and his fascination with right-wing vitalism all came together in his major work of the Twenties, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*).[18] Benjamin had moved to Frankfurt in 1923 to pursue the advanced degree that would have permitted him to teach in a university and to be recognized, as he later put it, as "the foremost critic of German literature." It was a disastrous decision from nearly every standpoint. His professors were hostile to his planned dissertation on the long-neglected German "sorrow-plays" (*Trauerspiele*) of the seventeenth century, which they considered an idiosyncratic subject. Moreover, Benjamin seemed determined to flout every academic convention, writing in the most esoteric of styles and prefacing his book with a willfully obscure "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" that summarized his views on Plato, German idealism, Romanticism, beauty, works of art, language, and symbolism. The author himself described these indigestible pages to Scholem as a display of "unmitigated chutzpah" comprehensible only to students of Kabbala. Benjamin finally withdrew the dissertation when he was warned it would be rejected.

Had his professors made their way past the introduction, they would have discovered that the book was a genuinely important investigation, inspired by the work of the art historian Alois Riegl, into the allegorical dimensions of a forgotten literature.[19] Benjamin portrays the baroque period as one of acute historical crisis, the moment when Europeans became conscious of the breakdown of the religiously ordered medieval world but before the birth of the modern. It was a time of peering into the abyss, of an awareness of the absolute separation between heaven and earth. "The hereafter is emptied of everything which contains the slightest breath of this world," and baroque man feels himself transported toward a "cataract," toward "catastrophic violence." According to Benjamin, the sorrow-plays were allegories of this experience. They presented a world without order or heroes, suffused with the melancholy of statesmen, tyrants, and martyrs, who are wracked by guilt.

By his own admission, Benjamin's theological and political reflections in the *Trauerspiel* book were also inspired by the right-wing legal theorist (and later Nazi functionary) Carl Schmitt, whose *Political Theology* had just been published in 1922.[20] Two features of Schmitt's work evidently attracted Benjamin. One was Schmitt's assertion that "all significant concepts

[12]Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (Schocken, 1971), pp. 10, 321, 21.

[13]Translated by Simon Kaplan (Ungar, 1972). This volume has an important introduction by Leo Strauss.

[14]Unpublished letter of 1937 translated in David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, second edition (Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 31.

[15]Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, p. 89.

[16]*Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (Leipzig: Barth, 1929–1932).

[17]This issue, which is finally discussed openly by German intellectual historians, is handled carefully by Wolin in the new introduction to his *Walter Benjamin*, pp. xxix–xl.

[18]A less-than-satisfactory translation of this work was published in England (but not America) as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: New Left Books, 1977).

[19]Charles Rosen's classic *New York Review* essay on this aspect of the book has now been reprinted as "The Ruins of Walter Benjamin" in *On Walter Benjamin* (pp. 129–175).

[20]*Political Theology: Four Chapters on Sovereignty* (MIT Press, 1985). Benjamin cites Schmitt as an inspiration in a curriculum vitae, now published in Siegfried Unseld, editor, *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 46–47.

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of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts." The other was Schmitt's characterization of all legal norms as resting, explicitly or implicitly, on a sovereign "decision," which either applied rules generally to people's actions or announced an "exception" to them. This doctrine, which came to be called decisionism, is summarized in Schmitt's statement that "sovereign is he who decides on the exception."[21] The sorrow-plays, in which princes, ministers, and even assassins were portrayed at their moments of ultimate decision and ultimate fate, represented baroque life just as Schmitt imagined all political life to be: as a permanent "state of emergency."[22]

None of these ideas appears to have surprised Scholem. In his 1964 essay "Walter Benjamin," he wrote:

> Even in authors whose picture of the world exhibits mostly reactionary traits he heard the subterranean rumblings of revolution, and generally he was keenly aware of what he called "the strange interplay between reactionary theory and revolutionary practice." The secularization of Jewish apocalyptic doctrine is plain for all to see and nowhere denies its origin.[23]

Yet for Benjamin's friends on the left, this taste for reactionary writers was a puzzle, indeed an embarrassment.[24] Even in 1930, long after Benjamin had converted to Marxism and was collaborating with Brecht, he dedicated a copy of the *Trauerspiel* book to Schmitt, proclaiming that he found his own work on aesthetics confirmed time and again in Schmitt's writings.[25] It is not really puzzling that Benjamin should have taken such authors seriously; virtually everyone—including the avant-garde—was drinking from the same murky waters in the interwar period. The real puzzle is that he would later pursue his theological-political quest on the hard, unwelcoming terrain of Marxism.

4.

Those who knew Walter Benjamin recognized that he underwent a conversion (his word) from theological speculation to Marxism in the 1920s, although neither they nor his later readers have ever agreed on what that conversion meant. We can date the experience to the summer of 1924, which Benjamin spent on Capri in the company of the philosopher Ernst Bloch. There he met a woman named Asja Lacis, a radical Latvian Communist who worked with Bertolt Brecht in political theater and later became a victim of Stalin's purges and spent a decade in a Kazakhstan camp. As we witness in his correspondence, Benjamin immediately fell in love with Lacis, and during their on-again, off-again affair over the next few years he was transported into a left-wing milieu that until then had held little interest for him. Scholem immediately noted the change in his letters, which now contained veiled references to Lacis. After returning to Berlin, Benjamin tried to allay his friend's concerns, writing that "I hope someday the Communist signals will come through to you more clearly than they did from Capri" and promising to explain "the various points of contact I have with radical Bolshevist theory." He then plunged into the study of Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* and had Lacis introduce him to Brecht, whom he began visiting in the summer and with whom he established a deferential relationship that had an unfortunate effect on his writing.

Benjamin's explanations and self-justifications of his turn to Marxism continued until the mid-Thirties and mark the high point of this extraordinary correspondence. In May 1925 Benjamin wrote to Scholem that if his current publishing plans did not work out, "I will probably hasten my involvement with Marxist politics and join the party"—though he was also toying with the idea of learning Hebrew instead; soon afterward he wrote to Martin Buber that he was being torn between "cultic and Communist activity." After his move to Paris in 1926 to work on a translation of Proust, he once again tried to explain his new thinking to the baffled Scholem. His reasoning was anything but reassuring.

> I do not concede that there is a difference between [religious and political] forms of observance in terms of their quintessential being. Yet I also do not concede that a mediation between them is possible. I am speaking here about an identity that manifests itself only in the sudden paradoxical change of one form of observance into the other (regardless of which direction), given the indispensable prerequisite that every observation of action proceed ruthlessly and with radical intent. Precisely for this reason, the task is not to decide once and for all, but to decide at every moment. But to *decide*.... If I were to join the Communist Party someday (something that, in turn, I am making dependent on one last twist of fate), my stance would be to behave always radically and never logically when it came to the most important things.... [T]here are no meaningfully *political* goals.

The essential unity of the theological and political, the "meaninglessness" of political goals, the dominance of fate, the need for a radical, illogical decision "regardless of the direction"—in a few sentences Benjamin summarizes all the major themes of his early political writings, though they are now presented as consistent with Marxism rather than with the writings of Georges Sorel or Carl Schmitt. Benjamin's Marxism first appears in his letters as an irrational act of commitment, as an act of "decisionism."

Benjamin's attraction to Marxism was widely shared at the time, but remains a puzzle. Although his early writings had defended the independence of a spiritual realm beyond "debased" modern experience, he now called himself a materialist; after criticizing historical progress in the name of a vague apocalyptic messianism, he now called himself a Marxist supporting Communist political action. How was this possible?

Gershom Scholem thought he had the answer. As he would later write, in all messianic movements and thinkers there is a dangerous impulse to "press for the end," to try to achieve here on earth what has been promised to us only in heaven. Religious history shows that "every attempt to realize [this impulse] tears open the abysses which lead each of its manifestations *ad absurdam*."[26] Such manifestations can develop in surprising directions as those caught up in them seek heaven on earth. Scholem had already studied how certain kabbalistic heresies in Judaism had preached a doctrine of "redemption through sin" and replaced the discipline of Torah with a mysterious anti-Torah that made material gratification a path to salvation. "Praised be he who permits the forbidden," taught the would-be Messiah Sabbatai Zevi, and the forbidden was usually profane in nature.[27]

Reading Scholem's historical writings along with his letters to Benjamin, we begin to understand the depth of his reaction to the latter's leftward turn. Not only was Marxism a materialistic heresy, but Scholem realized that Benjamin's genuine sacred insights would be lost in their profane transformation. And perhaps not just his insights. Benjamin gave every sign of being a man standing at the brink of an abyss, or, as one Christian acquaintance remarked, "of a person who has just climbed down from one cross and is about to mount another." Scholem was especially concerned that Benjamin would enter active Communist politics, and feared that this was not only an act of intellectual self-deception: in the political atmosphere of Weimar, it could be a threat to Benjamin's life.

Scholem put the matter bluntly in a letter of 1931.

> There is a disconcerting alienation and disjuncture between your *true* and *alleged* way of thinking. That is, you do not attain your insights through the strict application of a materialist method, but entirely independently of it [or] by playing with the ambiguities and interference phenomena of this method.... [You] could be a highly significant figure in the history of critical thought, the legitimate heir of the most productive and most genuine traditions of Hamann and Humboldt. On the other hand, your ostensible attempt to harness these results in a framework in which they suddenly present themselves as the apparent results of materialistic consid-

[21] *Political Theology*, pp. 36, 46, 13, 5.

[22] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 66.

[23] *On Jews and Judaism*, pp. 185, 195.

[24] For example, the Adornos silently deleted the footnotes to Schmitt in the *Trauerspiel* book when they prepared their 1955 edition of Benjamin's selected works. These have now been restored in the *Gesammelte Schriften*.

[25] *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.3, p. 887.

[26] Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, pp. 15, 35.

[27] Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, pp. 75–77. See the essay "Redemption through Sin" in that same volume and Scholem's other books, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, third ed. (Schocken, 1961) and *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton University Press, 1973).

erations introduces an entirely alien form element from which any intelligent reader can easily distance himself.... I am so dismayed that I must say to myself that this self-deception is possible only because you desire it, and more: that it can last only as long as it is not put to the materialist test. The complete certainty I have about what would happen to your writing if it occurred to you to present it *within* the Communist party is quite depressing.... It would become unambiguously and explosively clear that your dialectic is not that of the materialist whose method you try to approach, at the very moment you were unmasked by your fellow dialecticians as a typical counterrevolutionary and bourgeois.... I fear that the high cost of this error will be borne by you.... You would not, of course, be the last but perhaps the *most incomprehensible* sacrifice to the confusion of religion and politics.

As it turned out, Scholem's worry that Benjamin would commit himself body and soul to communism proved unfounded. Benjamin's Marxism remained desk-bound, and every encounter he had with real Communist politics left him disaffected. In the fall of 1926 he made a brief trip to Moscow to visit Asja Lacis and, as we learn from the diary he kept there, his journey to the heart of the Revolution was a personal and political fiasco: Moscow was far from being a utopia, Benjamin spoke no Russian, and Lacis had other lovers. He had brought with him an article on Goethe commissioned by the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, only to have the editors reject it as both heterodox and dogmatic. "The phrase 'class conflict' occurs ten times on every page," complained one official to his face.[28]

An understandable chill enters the correspondence between Benjamin and Scholem during the decade following Benjamin's turn to Marxism. Still, the friends eventually found an occasion for rapprochement in the summer of 1934, when Benjamin sent Scholem a draft of his powerful essay on Kafka. The essay is perhaps Benjamin's most fully achieved attempt to blend what he called in a later letter "the experience of the modern city dweller" and "mystical experience." He writes that the stories of Kafka that have been understood as parables

> are not parables, and yet they do not want to be taken at their face value; they lend themselves to quotation and can be told for purposes of clarification. But do we have the doctrine which Kafka's parables interpret and which K.'s postures and the gestures of his animals clarify? It does not exist; all we can say is that here and there we have an allusion to it. Kafka might have said that these are relics transmitting the doctrine, although we could regard them just as well as precursors preparing the doctrine.

Scholem reported himself "98 percent satisfied" with his friend's interpretation, which presents Kafka as "feeling his way to redemption" in the modern world but failing because he finds religious tradition empty. This failure is summed up in Kafka's comment to Max Brod that there is an infinite amount of hope in the world, "but not for us."

The Kafka essay does much to confirm Scholem's claim, first made in the frustrated-sounding letters of the early Thirties and later in his memoirs, that Benjamin's most important ideas came from his concern with theological issues, while his idiosyncratic materialism only confused them. It also receives surprising confirmation from Bertolt Brecht, with whom Benjamin was staying in the summer of 1934. As we learn in the previously unpublished "Conversations with Brecht," translated in *Reflections*, Brecht, a consistent materialist, was disappointed in

Gershom Scholem

and baffled by, Benjamin's theological backsliding in the Kafka essay. Benjamin faithfully reports Brecht's objection that Kafka is an "obscurantist," a "Jewboy," a "skinny, unlikable creature" whose mystical depths were at the farthest remove from the "crude thinking" the times demanded. Benjamin's celebration of Kafka's failed messianism simply advanced "Jewish fascism," Brecht charged, by fueling the bourgeois desire for charismatic leaders.

Benjamin was clearly not meant for Communist intellectual labor; his Marxism, if it can be called that, remained too intimately bound up with his original theological concerns ever to be fully disentangled. In a letter to Max Rychner of 1931 he admitted as much, even as he tried to defend his political position:

> I have never been able to do research and think in any sense other than, if you will, a theological one, namely, in accord with the Talmudic teaching about the forty-nine levels of meaning in every passage of Torah. That is, in my experience, the most trite Communist platitude possesses more *hierarchies of meaning* than does contemporary bourgeois profundity, which has only one meaning, that of an apologetic.

Formulations like this placed Benjamin in an intellectual no man's land where neither Scholem the theologian nor Brecht the materialist could reach him.

5.

Or was it a no man's land? Theodor Adorno didn't think so. Adorno is best known today as an important member of the Institute for Social Research, the so-called Frankfurt School, which he officially joined in the Thirties and which since the Twenties had offered a home to Marxists seeking a third way between Communist orthodoxy and bourgeois liberalism.[29] He had known the older Benjamin since their student days in Frankfurt and greatly admired him. While indifferent to the theological interests Benjamin shared with Scholem, he took Benjamin's turn to Marxism as a sign that a productive secularization of his thought was underway and that together they might develop a new theory accounting for the diminished aesthetic experience of the modern period. The two men were on friendly terms throughout the late Twenties and early Thirties, although they became much closer after 1933, when Benjamin fled Germany for Paris at the urging of Gretel Adorno.

Between his conversion to communism and his exile, Benjamin had attained some recognition as a critic in Germany. He earned a modest living by writing for newspapers and respected periodicals like the *Literarische Welt*, and by working on radio programs. This writing gave him independence and enabled him to travel widely in Europe. But when he emigrated in 1933, a few weeks after the Reichstag fire and just before Hitler assumed dictatorial powers, he had no reliable way of supporting himself. For a while he continued to write for the German press under pseudonyms, but this soon became difficult, and his commissions dwindled. To save money, he spent periods with friends on Ibiza and with Brecht in Denmark. He was even forced to swallow his pride and return for a time to his former wife, Dora, who was running a boarding house in San Remo. The last seven years of his correspondence make for distressing reading, as he hatches impractical plans for his financial salvation, and what promising opportunities arise are spoiled.

Benjamin could never have survived these exile years without Adorno's selfless efforts on his behalf. When the Institute left Frankfurt in 1933, first for Geneva, then for New York, Adorno arranged for Benjamin to receive a modest stipend for regular contributions to the Institute's journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. This payment was increased when Benjamin agreed to write a long study of nineteenth-century Paris. The Arcades Project (*Passagen-Werk* or *Passagenarbeit*), as it came to be called, had begun modestly enough in 1927 when Benjamin hit upon the idea of adopting the literary montage style of the Surrealists to evoke life in nineteenth-century France. He was inspired by Aragon's reverie *Le Paysan de Paris*, which had been published the previous year and which opens with an imaginary, dreamlike tour through the Passage de l'Opéra. He first mentions an essay on the Parisian arcades in 1928, in a letter to Scholem, where he writes that he is confident of finishing it in two weeks.

To everyone's dismay, the Arcades Project absorbed Benjamin's creative energies for the next thirteen years and at his death remained a chaotic ruin of notes, clippings, outlines, and fragmentary essays, all of which were miraculously preserved by Georges Bataille in the Bibliothèque Nationale during the war. English-speaking readers unable to wade through this thousand-page morass of material must rely on Benjamin's last essays to get some sense of his aims. In one of the most important fragments of the Arcades Project, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin contrasts depleted modern experience (*Erlebnis*) with symbolically rich poetic experience (*Erfahrung*). He interprets *Les Fleurs du mal* as reflecting the disintegration of the material world's "aura," the symbolic associations that once permitted sacred objects to "return our gaze," as Benjamin puts it. In his essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) he had already analyzed how modern productive forces robbed artworks of their aura, detaching them from the human traditions out of which they had emerged. The Arcades Project would try to show more subtly how the bourgeois nineteenth century had replaced the aura of the material world with a dream world, a "phantasmagoria" subtly reflecting and compensating for the contradictions of capitalist society. It would be a history of bourgeois delusions.

As originally conceived, the Arcades Project would have been much closer to the studies of dreams, archetypes, and collective memory undertaken by Klages and his followers, who had already employed the term "aura" in their work. But it soon took on a different shape and quite grandiose proportions under the influence of Adorno. When the two men discussed the project in 1929, Adorno immediately saw it as a model of his new critical theory, "the one piece of *prima philosophia* which has been given to us." He encouraged Benjamin to expand the project and to ground it more rigorously in Marx's notion of the commodity fetish. Benjamin later called this meeting the end of his "rhapsodic naiveté" and resolutely began studying Marx, whose work he knew only at second hand through Lukács. By the beginning of 1930 he could write to Scholem that the Arcades Project was "the theater of all my conflicts and all my ideas."

It became a theater of disillusionment. In 1935, in return for the Institute's support, Benjamin dutifully submitted a clear and well-organized prospectus of his work in progress, which has been translated in *Reflections* as "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century." In it he carefully outlined a new kind of social history capable of embracing architecture, manners, dress, interior design, literature, photography, city planning, and much more. Citing Michelet's maxim that "each age dreams the next," he imagined that this new history would teach us "to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled." This short essay has proven enormously influential among contemporary historians, who

[28] *Moscow Diary* (Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 81, 130–132.

[29] Rolf Wiggershaus's massive history, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance* (MIT Press, 1994), has recently appeared in translation. This work provides much new information but is far less accessible than Martin Jay's study of the School, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Little, Brown, 1973).

by now have produced a vast, if dubious, literature on the collective unconscious of the nineteenth century along Benjamin's lines.

To read through the copious material of the Arcades project, though, is a morbid experience. It seems less a study of the ruins of bourgeois life than the ruins of an intellectual's last productive years. The thirty-six files of quotations and aphorisms—on fashion, boredom, steel construction, prostitution, the stock exchange, the history of sects, and so on—are occasionally revealing, often funny, but generally repetitive and even dull. Yet they have been treated with all the solemnity due Pascal's *Pensées* by academic Benjaminians, who have made heroic exertions to restore this unwritten, unwritable work.

Some responsibility for the wreck of the Arcades Project must be assigned to Adorno, who in a series of long letters forced Benjamin to reconceive the project again and again. The letters make clear, however, that Adorno genuinely believed he was saving his friend from himself. Adorno, who saw the Arcades Project as a potential model for secular critical theory about bourgeois culture, worried to see it oscillating in Benjamin's hands between a vitalistic mysticism and a simple-minded Marxism. Adorno rejected the 1935 prospectus on the grounds that it was "undialectical" and that Benjamin was still "under the spell of bourgeois psychology." The letter is replete with such convoluted objections as "Haussmann's class consciousness inaugurates the explosion of the phantasmagoria precisely through the perfection of the commodity character in Hegelian self-consciousness." Later that month Benjamin replied in a sad, self-deprecatory letter (to Gretel, not Theodor), agreeing with most of the criticisms and promising to do better next time.

During the next four years, in return for his monthly payment from the Institute, Benjamin wrote regularly for the *Zeitschrift*, frequently on subjects that held little interest for him. Meanwhile the Arcades Project grew more and more out of control, even as his personal situation became increasingly precarious. In 1938, as Europe prepared for war, Benjamin submitted an enormous manuscript on Baudelaire as a miniature model of the Arcades book, only to encounter the same objections that Adorno had raised in 1935. "Let me express myself in as simple and Hegelian manner as possible," Adorno begins, without a trace of irony. He complained that Benjamin had drawn too direct a connection between the tax on wine and Baudelaire's poem about wine, in what Adorno calls "an unmediated and even causal manner." Adorno then added, unhelpfully, that "the materialistic determination of cultural characteristics is possible only when mediated by the *total* [social] *process*." Benjamin was devastated, more letters were exchanged, and a much revised version of the essay was finally published in the *Zeitschrift* in 1939 as "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire."

Though Gershom Scholem later collaborated with Adorno on republishing Benjamin's works, he always regretted Benjamin's association with the Frankfurt School, as did Hannah Arendt. While both were thankful to the Institute for supporting Benjamin financially, neither believed that Marxist critical theory was a meaningful enterprise, or that the term adequately described what was truly important about Benjamin's writings. And although Benjamin appreciated Adorno's mind, one senses in his letters a frustration with the editorial constraints imposed by Adorno and Horkheimer, which was exacerbated, no doubt, by the fact that his relation with the Institute was based on financial obligation.

We shall never know whether Benjamin's thought would eventually have developed more in Adorno's direction, fulfilling the latter's hope for a new secular, dialectical aesthetics. In the fall of 1939 Benjamin was interned in a French camp for enemy aliens as the *drôle de guerre* began. He spent the next year desperately seeking an American visa while rejecting his former wife's pleas to join her in England. In May 1940 the Germans attacked France, and in June Benjamin fled, first to Lourdes, then to Marseilles. In August he finally received a visa with Horkheimer's help but failed to find a departing ship. Near the end of September he tried to cross the Pyrenees with a group of refugees, only to be turned back by Spanish border guards at Port Bou. That night he took an overdose of morphine and died. The next day the rest of the group made safe passage across the frontier.

6.

Several months after Benjamin's suicide Hannah Arendt managed to escape from France to Spain. When she passed through Port Bou, she stopped to look for her friend's grave but could find no trace of it. In her baggage, however, she carried a trace of the man. It was a short essay, a sort of intellectual last will and testament entitled "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which Benjamin had given her just before his attempted flight. His expressed wish was that the essay not be published, but when Adorno received the manuscript, he decided it was too important to remain in private hands. It was first printed by the Institute in a mimeographed memorial tribute to Benjamin in 1942, and has since become one of the most controversial of his writings.

The "Theses" reflect Benjamin's apocalyptic vision of European politics in the late Thirties and his disappointment with communism's betrayal in the Hitler-Stalin pact. He had remained stubbornly, irresponsibly silent about the Moscow show trials in the Thirties, and throughout the decade could not bring himself to criticize Stalin publicly, even after Asja Lacis had been condemned to the gulag. But Stalin's pact with the devil finally shattered any illusions he may have had about communism's redemptive mission. In the Twenties Benjamin had played with the ideas of divine violence, radical decisionism, and political nihilism; in the early Thirties he could still idealize the frenzy of what he called "the destructive character." But now the real apocalypse approached, bringing with it satanic violence, not the Messiah.

At a deeper level, the "Theses" represent the last dramatic encounter between Benjamin's theological metaphysics and his historical materialism. The essay opens with an image of the philosophy of history as a chess game, which a puppet called historical materialism can win only "if it enlists the services of theology, which today," he says, "is wizened and has to keep out of sight." And what can materialism learn from theology? Essentially that the idea of historical progress is an illusion, that history is nothing but a series of catastrophes piling wreckage upon wreckage, reaching up to the heavens. The members of the working class had been corrupted by the idea of progress, which blinded them to the regressive social consequences that accompanied increased domination of the natural world. They were lulled into ignoring the "state of emergency" caused by the rising forces of fascism, and failed to respond. Materialism must now withdraw with "monastic discipline" from this belief in a progressive historical continuum, replacing it with a conception of history closer to that of traditional Judaism, which believed that "every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter." As Scholem later remarked, nothing remains of historical materialism in this hermetic text but the term itself.

Scholem's interpretation of Benjamin as a "theologian marooned in the realm of the profane" has for years proved a stumbling block to Marxists and critical theorists anxious to appropriate this curious thinker's legacy for their own purposes. Recently, as interest in Germany's lost Jewish culture has grown, there has been less reluctance to recognize theological elements in his work. A somewhat hazy consensus has emerged in German criticism, to the effect that Benjamin's secularization left him "torn" between the sacred and profane, the metaphysical and material. As a result of this fundamental conflict in his thought, he now seems an important part of the German philosophical tradition, which has been torn between these principles ever since Kant.

But even this consensus fails to appreciate fully what Scholem's insight into Benjamin has to teach us. Whatever Scholem's illusions about Benjamin's wavering intentions to learn Hebrew or to emigrate to Palestine, he correctly saw in Benjamin the modern incarnation of the type of thinker who cannot be understood apart from traditional religious distinctions. For genuine materialists, there can be no real tension between the sacred and profane, only between illusion and enlightenment. But for the theologically attuned this tension will continue to exist as long as we must find our way in a fallen world. They may cope with it by living within law and tradition, or they may try to abolish the tension altogether. Of these, some withdraw into an otherworldly mysticism or esotericism, some throw themselves fully into the world in hopes of redeeming it with a new law, a new gospel, or a new social order. Others, like Benjamin, flirt promiscuously with both possibilities, remaining a riddle to themselves and to all who encounter them. □

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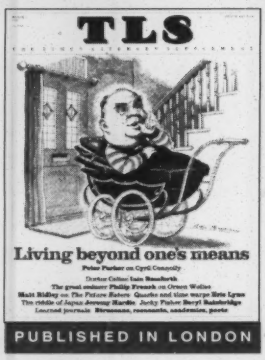

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'Sex, Lies, and Social Science': An Exchange

To the Editors:

We are puzzled by the review of our book, *The Social Organization of Sexuality* [*NYR*, April 20], because it is professionally incompetent and motivated by such an evident animus against the social sciences in general. We do not think it appropriate for a biologist, even a noted population geneticist whose empirical work is on the *Drosophila* fruit fly and other "simple" animals, to review a book that describes its principal task as formulating a social perspective on human sexual conduct in the United States. The notion that an economist, a sociologist or a physicist should review professional work on population genetics would properly be greeted with derision. Lewontin's professional qualifications are of relevance in discussing his review since he himself asserts that his role as a *scientist* grants him the authority of special expertise for commenting on specific aspects of our book. Nowhere is that basis in expert knowledge evident in the innuendo and diatribe that constitute his review.

The central premise of Lewontin's review is that people routinely and pervasively lie about sexual behavior—indeed, it would seem all aspects of their lives—and thus none of the data from our survey of 3,432 people can be taken seriously. But Lewontin relates no systematic empirical information to substantiate his claim. Rather, he relies on a set of rhetorical devices that tendentiously advance his assertions.

Lewontin opens the review with an argument based on a false analogy. He discusses at length the problems of credibility in autobiographical statements and then asserts the analogical equivalence of autobiography and the self-reports given in response to our questions. The reader by now is supposed to be thinking, "I certainly would not tell anybody that I had sex with my spouse last night while clutching a yellow rubber ducky. I'd lie—at least about the rubber ducky." But autobiography, by definition, involves the public disclosure of the identity of the person. This sets in train all the motivations to create a favorable self-image in the minds of others and perhaps some of the outcomes Lewontin asserts. In contrast, we went to great lengths to guarantee the privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of our respondents' answers as well as to provide a strong rationale for an individual to be candid and honest with us. We spent a great deal of time worrying about how we could check the reliability and honesty of our respondents' answers. While we readily admit that we were not always successful in securing full disclosure, his false analogy simply misses the point altogether.

Lewontin's next move is to provide an instance demonstrating the data's invalidity by discussing the large discrepancy between the average numbers of partners reported by men and women and the logical impossibility of such a situation assuming that they are recruiting their partners from a common pool. In the 52-page chapter devoted to the numbers of sex partners, we explicitly discuss (on p. 174) the undesirability of using averages (means) to summarize the central tendencies of distributions as skewed and narrowly concentrated (with long, unevenly distributed tails) as these are. In addition, we explore in considerable detail the reasons for this discrepancy. Lewontin argues that if we could not get this "simple fact" right, it is evidence that all else is spurious. Error is a problem in all observations (including those in biology), how it is dealt with and its public recognition is the test of science. His decision to rest his case on this single issue without reference to its context forces us to conclude that he willfully misrepresented our analysis.

But he isn't satisfied with this. In an obscure footnote in the middle of the review that has no obvious relevance to our work at all, he mentions *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray, the controversial book on racial differences in intelligence. Here we are being subjected to guilt by association. All readers of the *Review* surely know exactly what to think of these infamous social scientists. And we are insidiously being tossed into the pot with them for no other reason than we too are social scientists.

Finally, we have Lewontin's discussion of our finding that 45 percent of men between the ages of 80 and 84 claim to have sex partners. He chuckles at our credulity in reporting such patent nonsense, being just one more instance of our hopeless gullibility of believing everything we are told by our respondents. Now this is a rather nice instance of his tendentious and misleading use of our data to support his central claim that everybody is lying about their sex lives. The survey in question, the General Social Survey (GSS), is a widely known, high-quality, regularly conducted survey that professionally knowledgeable people rely on for estimating social trends of various sorts. It is sponsored by the National Science Foundation and has been subjected to regular scientific peer review for some twenty years. To the professional social scientist, it is well known to be a household-based sample that excludes the *institutionalized* parts of the population. Any number of census and other highly regarded survey studies have also noted that, due to differential mortality and other factors, older women are progressively more likely to be living alone. By age 70, about 70 percent of women report, in the GSS, no sex partners in the past year. Older men, in contrast, are far more likely to be living with someone—the sex ratio is increasingly in their favor so far as the surplus of older women to older men is concerned. It is therefore not at all surprising that noninstitutionalized men in their eighties—presumably healthy enough to be living on their own—would have a fair chance of reporting that they have a sex partner. We discuss at length in the book the different meanings of sexuality across age, time and social circumstance. We believe the answers are hardly likely to be crazed lies by sex-starved octogenarians who are posturing like teenagers for the edification of credulous social scientists.

The review is a pastiche of ill-informed personal opinion that makes unfounded claims of relevant scientific authority and expertise. Readers of *The New York Review of Books* deserve better.

Edward O. Laumann
John H. Gagnon
Robert T. Michael
Stuart Michaels

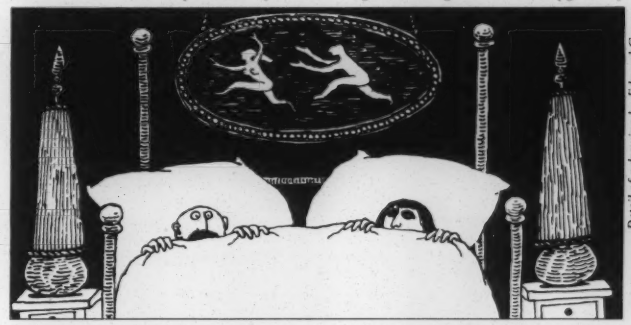
Department of Sociology
The University of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

To the Editors:

In the course of Richard Lewontin's brilliant essay "Sex, Lies, and Social Science" he remarks that if the study he reviewed is typical of American scientific sociology, then this discipline must be in "deep trouble." That's putting it mildly. American sociology has become a refuge for the academically challenged. Some universities have closed their sociology departments; many have decided the discipline merits little new money.

Yet mere stupidity cannot explain the analytic weaknesses of studies like the NORC sexuality project; nor do social scientists so very gainfully employed in such shops simply misunderstand the scientific enterprise. The difficulties with this research, like the larger troubles of sociology, are political.

The British prime minister Margaret Thatcher famously declared a generation ago, "There is no society, only individuals and their families." In an eerie way, much positivistic sociological research subscribes to this anti-social nostrum. It does so, as in the NORC study, by not probing subjects which resist quantification; the usual disclaimer is that while such matters as the relation of sex and love may be important, they cannot be scientifically researched. Here is where politics enters; there's something comforting about sacrificing reality on the altar of research. The "dull science"—as Michel Foucault called American sociology—legitimates dissociation from the entanglements, contradictions, and difficulties of actual social experience. Dull knowledge has the same positive political value in Gingrich's America as it did in Thatcher's Britain. Lewontin complains of the superficiality of the NORC analysis, but maybe the very promise of a calming superficiality is what attracted so much money to this project.



Detail of a drawing by Edward Gorey

However, if Lewontin's exposé is just, he uses a meat cleaver where a scalpel would have served him better. Is quantifying social phenomena an inherent evil, as at points in his essay he seems to suggest? Lewontin surely wouldn't deny that the Census Bureau provides useful and necessary information. In principle, survey research has its uses, in revealing how people think about themselves. (I found it both interesting and cheering that 45 percent of men between the ages of 80 and 84 in the NORC study reported still having sex with a partner, even if the aged have confused fantasy with fact.) Method *per se* isn't the issue.

I wish Lewontin had put his attack in a larger historical context. From its origins in Social Darwinism and the Progressive movement, American sociology has struggled with the contrary claims of those afflicted with physics envy and researchers—whether deploying numbers or words—more engaged in the dilemmas of society. In that struggle, midwestern Protestant mandarins of positivist science often came into conflict with East Coast Jews who in turn wrestled with their own Marxist commitments; great quantitative researchers from abroad, like Paul Lazarsfeld at Columbia, sought to disrupt the complacency of native bean counters. In the last twenty years, more interesting "hard" sociological research has been done in medical, planning, and law schools, and better research on culture and society in the humanities departments, than in sociology departments. The *intellectual* enterprise of sociology is hardly represented by the dumbed-down study Lewontin rips apart.

What places like NORC command, like other reactionary enterprises, is money. To defend themselves, the minions of these institutions will undoubtedly attack Lewontin for being anti-empirical, which will miss exactly his point, that their brand of science represses trenchant social evidence. My worry is that this repression is more than an academic evil. Sociology in its dumbed-down condition is emblematic of a society that doesn't want to know too much about itself.

Richard Sennett

New York University
New York City

R. C. Lewontin *replies*:

It should come as no surprise to the readers of *The New York Review* that the authors of *The Social Organization of Sexuality* did not like what I wrote. I confess to having amused myself over the last couple of weeks by imagining what their inevitable letter would contain. I was sure that they would challenge the competence of a biologist to judge social science, as indeed they have. I also imagined, and hoped, that they would raise a series of substantive objections to my characterization of their methodology, backed by various pieces of evidence of which the review took no account, so that we might engage in a revealing unpacking of the issues. In this, alas, I was too sanguine. Their letter makes no arguments, but relies on their disciplinary authority while repeating unsubstantiated and doubtful claims.

It is reasonable that Laumann et al. would have preferred to have their work reviewed by a member of their own school of sociology, someone sharing the same unexamined methodological assumptions. They could then avoid the always unpleasant necessity of justifying the epistemic basis on which the entire structure of their work depends. Their assertion of my incompetence, however, is off the mark. It is both temperamentally and ideologically repugnant to me to provide advertisements for myself, but as I do not want Laumann and his colleagues, or other readers of the review, to avoid confronting the issues by a facile dismissal of my expertise, I am obliged to provide a CV. Although a biologist, I have a graduate degree in mathematical statistics and have taught the subject for forty years. About 10 percent of my technical publications, including a textbook of statistics, have been devoted to problems of statistical sampling, estimation, and hypothesis testing. More important, my biological work must be classified as methodological, my chief contribution to the field having been an analysis of the deep epistemological difficulties posed by the data of evolutionary genetics and the introduction of new experimental approaches specifically designed to overcome the ambiguities. Finally, my work on epistemological problems, produced both alone and together with philosophers of science, appears in standard philosophical journals.[1] Whatever may be at issue here, it is not competence.

Laumann et al. complain that the results of sample surveys were falsely analogized with autobiography. Either they do not understand the structure of analogical reasoning or, as is more likely, they were so annoyed by the review that they read it only impressionistically. No such analogy was drawn, nor was any argument from analogy made. On the contrary, autobiography, repressed memory, and survey interviews were given as three different examples of a general problem of deriving objective information from self-report. I drew a contrast between the possibility of verification in the first two cases and the

[1] For a less technical and more generally accessible example, see "Facts and the Factitious in the Natural Sciences" in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991), pp. 140–153.

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virtual impossibility in the last. Here our authors touch on the central methodological issue. It is their view that, although people may lie or exaggerate in autobiographies because they are trying to create a public persona, they will tell the truth in anonymous interviews, because there is no motivation to manipulate the impression that strangers have of us. Is it really true that quantitative sociologists are so divorced from introspection and so insensitive to social interactions that they take such a naive view of human behavior? Do they really believe all those things they hear from the person on the next bar stool or the seat next to them in the airplane? The Yellow Kid, who made a living from fleecing the gullible, used to say that anyone who could not con a banker ought to go into another line of work. Maybe, but before giving up, they should try professors of sociology. Putting aside subjective questions, haven't they even read the voluminous literature on the sociology of fashion? It is ironic that a student of "simple organisms" has to instruct those who inquire about human beings about the complexity of their objects of study.

First, Professor Laumann, people do not tell *themselves* the truth about their own lives. The need to create a satisfying narrative out of an inconsistent and often irrational and disappointing jumble of feelings and events leads each of us to write and rewrite our autobiographies inside our own heads, irrespective of whether anyone else is ever privy to the story. Second, these stories, which we then mistake for the truth, become the basis for further conscious manipulation and manufacture when we have exchanges with other human beings. If the investigators at NORC really do not care what strangers think of them, then they are possessed of an insouciance and hauteur otherwise unknown in Western society. It is precisely in the interaction with strangers who are not part of their social network, and who will never intersect their lives again, that people feel most free to embroider their life stories, because they will never be caught out.

Laumann et al. try to minimize the impact of the observed discrepancy in the number of sexual partners reported by men and by women. There is an attempt at obfuscation in a remark by Laumann and his colleagues about averages not containing as much information as more detailed frequency descriptions. True, but irrelevant, because in their data men consistently report more partners across the entire frequency distribution. Anyway, Laumann et al. do not deny the discrepancy. Indeed it is they who brought it up and discussed it in the book, and it is they, not I, who offered as the most likely explanation that men "exaggerate" and women "minimize" their sexual promiscuity. Then they try to discount the impact of the discrepancy on the study as a whole. After all, it is just one false note, and we cannot expect perfection. People may lie or fantasize about how many sexual partners they have, but we can take everything else they say at face value.

But this neatly ignores the fact that this comparison provides the *only* internal check on consistency that the study allows. I nowhere claimed that "all else is spurious," but rather that we are left in the unfortunate position of not knowing what is true when our only test fails. Then, in an extraordinary bit of academic chutzpah that turns the usual requirement for validation on its head, Laumann et al. say that it is up to those who question the data to demonstrate their unreliability. For years those of us who work on "simple" organisms have sheepishly accepted the burden of supporting our own claims, and the failure of the sole internal check on the validity of the data usually creates a certain difficulty in getting one's work published. *Autres pays, autres moeurs.*

I would not want to claim that we learn nothing from people's answers in sex surveys. One thing that they seem to establish is that individual fantasies follow cultural stereotypes. In the French equivalent of the NORC study involving over 20,000 telephone interviews, French men reported four times as many partners as French women![2] Of course, it may be that with the greater distance offered by the telephone, men feel freer to "exaggerate," but that explanation doesn't offer much solace to those who think that anonymity breeds truthfulness.

While Laumann and his colleagues believe that men exaggerate while they are aged between eighteen and fifty-nine, they (backed by the peer review panels of the National Science Foundation) seem to have complete confidence in the frankness of octogenarians. Perhaps, as men contemplate their impending mortality, the dread of something after death makes lying about sex seem risky. We must, however, at least consider the alternative that affirming one's continued sexual prowess in great age is a form of whistling in the dark.

Far from having "an animus against the social sciences," I have considerable sympathy for the position in which sociologists find themselves. They are asking about the most complex and difficult phenomena in the most complex and recalcitrant organisms, without that liberty to manipulate their objects of study which is enjoyed by natural scientists. In comparison, the task of the molecular biologist is trivial. Living organisms are at the nexus of a large number of weakly determining causal pathways, and the classic method of studying such systems is to exaggerate the effect of one pathway while holding the others constant. When such experimental manipulation is not possible we have no recourse but to stand off and describe the system in all its complexity. The inevitable consequence is that the structure of inference is much looser and it becomes extremely difficult to test our explanations. How much worse is the situation of those observers whose objects of study have consciousness and who depend on the objects themselves to report on their own state.

The division between those who try to learn about the world by manipulating it and those who can only observe it has led, in natural science, to a struggle for legitimacy. The experimentalists look down on the observers as merely telling uncheckable just-so stories, while the observers scorn the experimentalists for their cheap victories over excessively simple phenomena. In biology the two camps are now generally segregated in separate academic departments where they can go about their business unhasseled by the unbelievers. But the battle is unequal because the observers' consciousness of what it is to do "real" science has been formed in a world dominated by the manipulators of nature. The observers then pretend to an exactness that they cannot achieve and they attempt to objectify a part of nature that is completely accessible only with the aid of subjective tools.

Richard Sennett has formulated better, and with more authority than I could, the ideological issues in sociology. (Is he, too, incompetent?) He is, of course, right when he insists that quantitative information is important in sociology. Data on birth, death, immigration, marriage, divorce, social class, neighborhood, causes of mortality and morbidity, occupations, wage rates, and many other variables are indispensable for sociological investigations. My "meat cleaver" was never meant to sever those limbs from the body of knowledge. But it does not follow that collecting statistics, especially survey statistics with their utter ambiguity of interpretation, is sociology. A better model is Chevalier's *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses.*[3] Chevalier's realization was that social phenomena could not be understood without the demographic statistics, but that these numbers can have no interpretation in themselves without a coherent narrative of social life. For contemporary life we have our own experience to help us understand the numbers. For the past we depend on literature, so the locales, characters, and events in the novels of Balzac, Hugo, and Sue form as much a part of the evidence about nineteenth-century Paris as the schedules of mortality and the tables of wage rates.

Even though the world is material and all its phenomena, including human consciousness, are products of material forces, we should not confuse the way the world is with our ability to know about it. Like it or not, there are a lot of questions that cannot be answered, and even more that cannot be answered exactly. There is nothing shameful in that admission.

[2] A. Spira and N. Bajos, *Les comportements sexuels en France* (Paris: Documentation Française, 1993).

[3] Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIXème siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1958).

LETTERS

'PRINCE OF THE CITY'

To the Editors:

I don't make it a practice to respond to reviewers, but Martin Filler's "review" ["Prince of the City," *NYR*, December 22, 1994] of my biography of Philip Johnson prompts me to reverse that policy, since in ways both large and small it misrepresents what I have written. Filler has chosen—which is his right—to devote most of his attention to his own views about Johnson rather than to mine, but since he has used my book in his arguments, I think a few things need to be cleared up.

Filler recites the facts of Johnson's political past, all taken from what I wrote (but not so credited), then decides that I gave Johnson a pass by drawing the disappointingly modest conclusion that he was a "trifler." Filler cites a quotation from my text, but abridges it. More completely it says:

> The debate over [Johnson's] political activities of the later 1930s tends to overshadow a major irony: The amount of power he yearned for was inversely proportional to the amount he actually attained. In politics, he proved to be a trifler, the dilettante he earlier feared himself to be, a model of futility who sought to find a messiah or to pursue messianic ends but whose most lasting following turned out to be the agents of the FBI—who themselves finally grew bored with him. In short, he was never much of a political threat to anyone, still less an effective doer of either political good or political evil. The audience to which his writings appealed proved small and inconsequential... to the extent that his actions can be made out, they were decidedly unheroic, meriting little more substantial attention than they have gained.

The characterization of Johnson's politics of the 1930s as repellent is spelled out in more detail in my book than in Filler's essay, but it is not inconsistent with the view that Johnson ended up a trifler at the game, not a potent, heavy-duty villain.

Further to the matter of Johnson and fascism, Filler erects several bridges between politics and architecture that do not support the weight he puts on them. The resemblance he cites between Johnson's Sheldon Memorial Gallery in Lincoln, Nebraska, and Paul Ludwig Troost's House of German Art in Munich rests on an unsubstantiated subjective assertion. He is also apparently unaware that the ornament on

the gate of Johnson's Roofless Church in New Harmony, Indiana—akin in Filler's mind to that "of Nazi villas"—was applied, against Johnson's wishes, by the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, who, as a proud Jew, was hardly likely to seek inspiration in Nazi decor.

There are other things wrong in Filler's piece—details in quantity that he could have gotten right—or at least disputed—had he paid better attention to what I wrote. To wit: Johnson did not help Mies van der Rohe emigrate to America. (On two separate occasions, enumerated in the endnotes, Johnson denied having known in the 1930s of Alfred Barr's role in arranging an American commission for Mies that the record shows led to Mies's permanent move to the United States.) Nor, as I tried to suggest, is there any proof that Johnson as early as 1930 was preparing the famous 1932 exhibition of modern architecture at the Museum of Modern Art. Filler also leaves the reader with the impression, already well amended elsewhere, that the name International Style

was thought up by Barr alone. I was at pains to show that the origins predate Barr's usage and involve more people than Barr. And while I did not write much about the cost of the house Johnson built for himself in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Filler's claim that it was "hugely expensive" seems contradicted by its price tag of $24,000, hardly princely by 1942 standards.

Filler's devotion to his biases carries over to his apodictic insistence that "there can be no hope of understanding Johnson's place in the architectural landscape of his time without reference to its central figure," whom he identifies as Louis Kahn. Surely Kahn (to whom I do refer, more than once) was a great architect and greater than Johnson, but whether that makes him as important to Johnson's "place" as, say, Mies, or architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock or museum director Alfred Barr or for that matter, Friedrich Nietzsche, requires better argument than Filler gives it. He spends several paragraphs in a variation of the old Moses-Aaron moral: Kahn was awkward and Johnson smooth, Kahn had to struggle while Johnson had it easy, Kahn was inarticulate, Johnson verbally facile. Such a scenario is the stuff of a Disney movie. Kahn doesn't merit reverence simply because he came from the school of hard knocks, nor is Johnson to be scorned for having been born to privilege and having taken productive advantage of it—indeed, given his legendary energy, the implication that he could "avoid concentrated work" is just plain unfair.

Filler gets closer to the heart of the matter when he contrasts, though again somewhat deceptively, the "nihilist" position Johnson ascribed to himself in the 1990s with Kahn's belief—of 1961—that architecture can embody noble values. Yet in fact, when Kahn made his statement ("We are not contributing to the making of our institutions greater... Architecture, at least, can do its part in making the spaces in [an institution] great)," Johnson was discussing architecture more often than not in almost identically high-minded terms (several instances cited in my text). What Filler fails to add or explain is that Johnson in the ensuing three decades has looked at the mess all of us have made of the planet and decided that neither the words nor the works of the most loftily motivated architects and patrons can keep the modern commercial world from constantly riding roughshod over the noble values, except in isolated instances. The low priority of high ideals is, practically speaking, built into the contemporary system.

Is that cynical? Probably. Johnson is a cynic, but he is no less a realist, and there is something to be said for realism in the face of the increasingly vast and unmanageable urban world of the late 20th century.

What else is he? An unreconstructed esthetic formalist and a social elitist who is little touched with compassion for humankind or the commonweal. It is hardly surprising that he has led a frequently amoral personal life, which is precisely why I discussed his romantic liaisons the way he reported them to me himself—with a candor Filler could find only "embarrassing." Johnson is also an indefatigable power broker, whose talent for networking is awesome, not to say frightening, and whose unsentimental worldview is reflected in his admiration of such anti-Enlightenment thinkers as Nietzsche, De Maistre, Sorel, and Lichtenberg. Yet in his dedication to the arts and his own extraordinarily wide-ranging cultural achievements he is a demonstrably serious, thoughtful figure of historical significance. The seriousness is concealed by the famous wit and the notorious dissimulations and even the occasional intellectual brutality. But he is a man of measure, love him or not. The central message of my biography is that Johnson is a far more complicated and fascinating piece of humanity than Martin Filler manages to portray in his one-dimensional image.

Franz Schulze

Department of Art
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Lake Forest, Illinois

Martin Filler *replies:*

Franz Schulze's more extensive citation of his assessment of Philip Johnson's political culpability only reinforces my opinion that the author is insufficiently sensitive to the enormity of Johnson's transgression, whatever Professor Schulze's definition of "a potent, heavy-duty villain" might be. As I noted in my review, the comparisons between Johnson's work of the 1960s and Nazi architecture were made by the architecture critic Charles Jencks, and far from representing "an unsubstantiated subjective assertion," those affinities are supported by direct visual analysis.

Johnson, as Professor Schulze points out in his book, has a sometimes elastic notion of truth. Thus, although Johnson told Professor Schulze otherwise, the architect said to me in a 1988 interview that "perhaps my greatest accomplishment was getting Mies to this country."* Given Professor Schulze's statement that "according to Marga Barr and Philip, Alfred on his own thought of the same name" for the International Style, it seems fair to say that Alfred Barr named it. Even though Walter Gropius wrote a 1925 book called *Internationale Architektur*, and the term "International Style" had been used previously by art historians to characterize one tendency in fifteenth-century European painting, its best-known application can be traced directly to Barr's decision, as director of the Museum of Modern Art, to use it for the 1932 exhibition.

The price of Johnson's own house in Cambridge was indeed quite high for 1942: Frank Lloyd Wright's comparably sized Goetsch-Winkler house of 1939–1940 in Okemos, Michigan, cost just under $6,600. Cost is always relative to one's means, and Johnson was then a rich man. In Hilary Lewis and John O'Connor's *Philip Johnson: The Architect in His Own Words*, the architect says, "It was a little expensive. In those days, of course, it seemed like nothing.... The house, believe it or not, is prefabricated. This very tricky system worked all right, it just cost about twice what stud walls would have cost.... The most expensive way you could possibly imagine building."

The surprising naiveté Professor Schulze demonstrates throughout his book is underscored by his characterization of my contrasts between Johnson and Louis Kahn as biblical (I think he means Jacob and Esau—"Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man"—not Moses and Aaron) and simultaneously suitable for a Disney scenario. In fact, it is precisely through personal presentation that many Establishment architectural commissions are decided. No, Johnson does not deserve "to be scorned for having been born to privilege," and I do not believe I did so, but his dilatory professional practice during the first decade of his career shows little evidence, in architecture at least, of "his legendary energy."

Professor Schulze does indeed mention Kahn six times, though his cursory treatment of the preeminent American architect of Johnson's generation in a book of over four hundred pages does merit my phrase "only in passing." Kahn is so generally accepted as the leading figure of the period by most architectural historians that in an essay on Johnson more extensive pleading on Kahn's behalf seemed to me beside the point. As high-minded and reminiscent of Kahn as Johnson's statements about architecture may have been (though Professor Schulze here chooses not to quote them), Johnson's actions to me speak louder than words.

I, for one, do not consider Johnson's homosexuality to be "amoral," or even immoral. What I found embarrassing was not Johnson's descriptions of his sex life but rather Professor Schulze's writing. Finally, I did praise Johnson's considerable contributions to the arts and acknowledge his significant role in late-twentieth-century American culture. It is a pity, however, that his first biographer was not up to capturing that "complicated and fascinating piece of humanity" with the subtlety, sophistication, and moral insight that the subject requires.

*Martin Filler, "Philip Johnson: Deconstruction Worker," *Interview*, May 1988, p. 109.

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CHICAGO—DEAL OF A LIFETIME! WARM, FUNNY, ATTRACTIVE DJM, 45, mensch, well-liked successful professional, possessing honesty and integrity—loves the paradoxes of life, passionate about people and ideas; looking for lady, 38–46, who possesses warmth, intelligence, grace, and who loves to laugh. Letter/photo please. *NYR Box 1215.*

ENCHANTING, EBULLIENT REDHEAD. Compelling blue eyes. Tall, leggy professional. Enjoys strolling city blvds and coastal frolicking. Passionate about the visual arts and music. Seeking man over 50. Affectionate, upbeat, successful, clever, urbane. Set my heart awhirl. *NYR Box 1216.*

BEAUTIFUL, BRIGHT, FUNNY, MANHATTAN PROFESSIONAL WOMAN (has car, will travel—a bit), redheaded, vivacious, in fabulous shape, seeks attractive man, 35–50, professional/and bright. Single dads preferred. Photo please. *NYR Box 1217.*

I'M A MARRIED MAN, LATE FIFTIES, HEALTHY, fit & so on, who's looking for a doubtless rare kind of woman—herself also married, centered, but who feels something missing. I'm not talking here of domesticity, long walks, concerts, touring Tuscany together. Let's call what I have in mind the possibility of sexual friendship. Something private, pleasurable, deliberately compartmentalized. The woman I'm looking for is bound to be shy about an ad like this but conquer your shyness enough to write me and then we'll see what we want to happen next. *NYR Box 1027*

BEAUTIFUL BUXOM BRUNETTE seeks Big Bear of a man who is as comfortable discussing Dostoyevsky as he is fixing the sink or having tea in New Delhi. Unconventional, adventurous Manhattan architect seeks spirited man (35–45) for keeps. *NYR Box 1218.*

MALE 79 (MORE LIKE 69) loves art, archaeology, poetry, politics, thought, travel, seeks woman with same passions. *NYR Box 1219.*

DNRJM, 65, 5'9", NYC, Jewish-flavored Math. Professor, Ivy League, two children, seeks fellow surfer, 52–68, to ride wave of exuberance. *NYR Box 1220.*

FAIRFIELD COUNTY, CT. Pretty, funny lady with charming house, very cute dog, and Ph.D. seeks witty fellow, 50 plus, for dinner, the movies, and happy endings. *NYR Box 1221.*

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seeking reason to be on time: Seeker in question is divorced, mother of five-year-old daughter, good-looking, reflective, witty, excellent listener and conversationalist, intermittently seductive. Writer of some repute, ready to love and be loved. Matters will be expedited if the man in question is Jewish, 40s to early 50s, accomplished, brainy, independent-minded, and capable of recognizing a tender heart beneath a wary exterior. NYR Box 1236.

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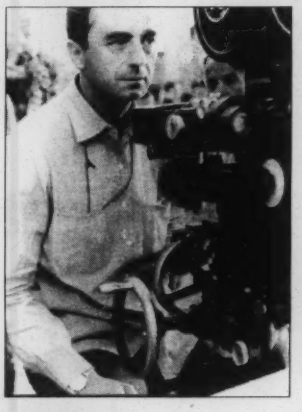

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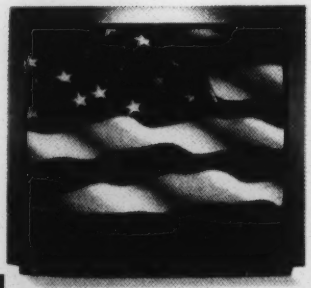

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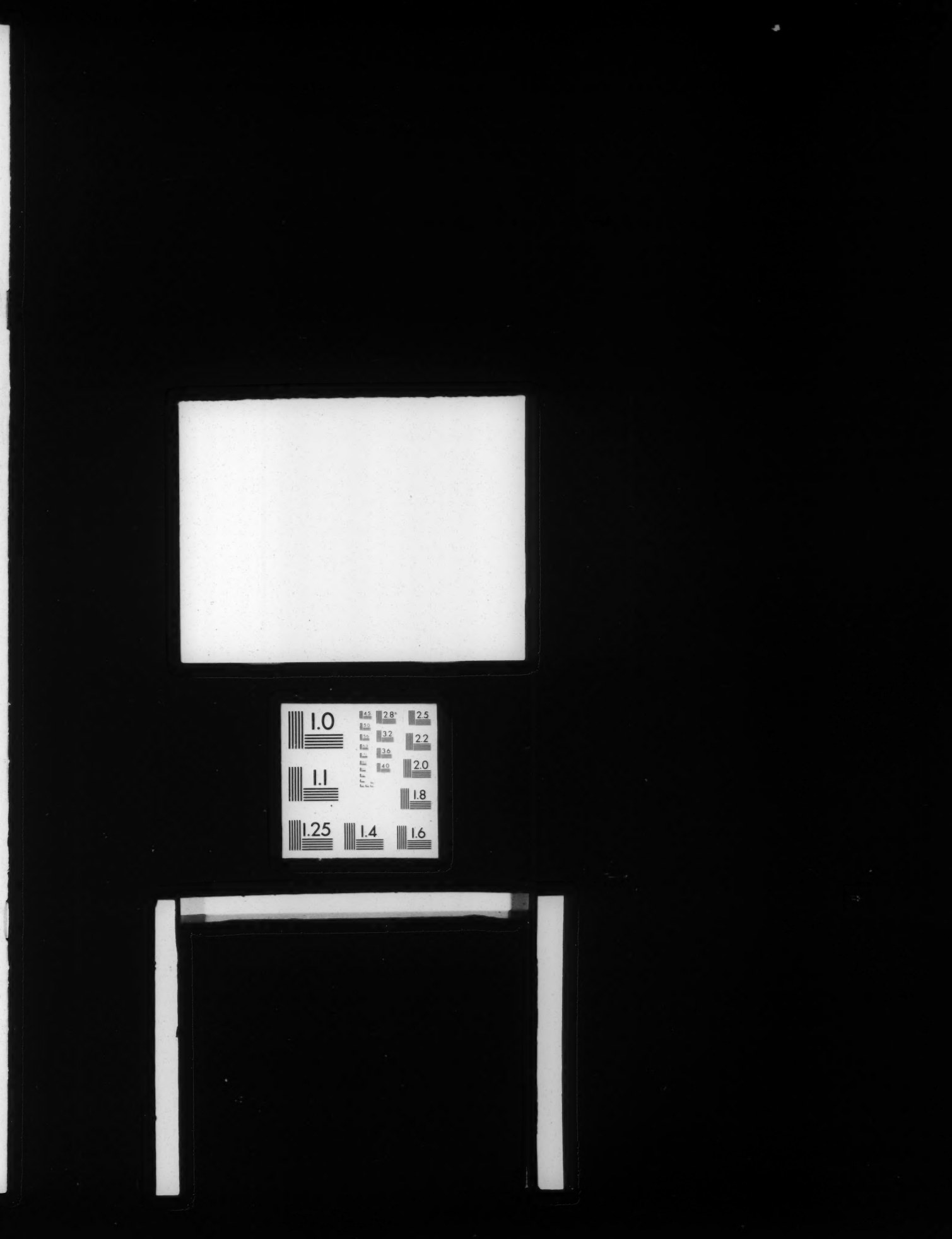
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